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Fusing the Atom

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Two Book
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Columns



Infestations

By Jeff Janoda

Art by Lubov

The great battleship screamed its agony underwater, metal shearing and twisting into mad shapes, the cold waters of the North Atlantic pouring into the holes ripped by countless torpedoes and shells. It seemed to give one last shudder, and then capsized and disappeared beneath the surface.

Far below, Jaconit kept a wary eye on the hulk's descent. A turret with massive guns protruding slid out of its mounting and sank like a stone beside him. He practically drooled at the sight of so much clean, pure metal, but he was here for another reason. Watch, watch, he crooned to himself.

A billowing flicker of yellow followed in the suction of the turret. A hundred feet deep, the sailor was dead already, dead to his shipmates, dead to his country, dead to his family, with only the fading beat of his heart and the helpless flailing of his arms and legs to say otherwise. Even that would be gone in a few seconds. Jaconit moved in quickly. Flexing his membranous gill-wing around the man tightly, he pumped heat into the tissue, and oxygen-rich fluid flooded the man's throat. Negative buoyancy carried them deeper, while he carefully monitored the sailor's pulse and core temperature, guiding himself by pulsed sonar as the light failed altogether. Only the whales and the giant squid swam here. He hoped to see one. It had been a long time since he'd been back to Earth.

He came to the Sphere and insinuated himself carefully into it. Pressure was kept at one atmosphere, and warm, tangy air washed over him. He found an empty niche, a simple shelf on the inside of the Sphere with a raised platform to sleep on. He birthed the sailor slowly, sliding him onto the raised dais, and then wiped the slime away from the face and head.

A boy. Young, no older than twenty. Perfect. These were always the easiest. He waited patiently, humming to himself now and then. All around the Sphere he could see the others sliding through with their tender cargoes. It seemed that they had made a good haul. Only sinkers were taken; floaters were left strictly alone. It was the rule.

The Sphere was half a kilometre across, empty space except for the large platform floating in the centre. About half of the niches were filled now. The hum of activity died gradually as the harvested survivors were exuded and left to sleep, their guardians watching over them. Jaconit spotted Tania in a niche close to him and called softly to her. She mewed back, intent as usual on her ward; so diligent, she was. He'd learned much from her.

Hours passed. Light faded to a twilight gloom and then brightened again: simulated dawn. The sailor

stirred, writhing as if in pain, and then sat upright, his eyes wide. He faced inward, toward the centre, not seeing the bulk of Jaconit's form huddled in a corner of the niche. The eyes swept back and forth across the expanse. They locked on something, and Jaconit saw one of his own People emerge from the shadows on the far side and stretch the gill-wing around his leathery form, easing out the kinks. A sharp intake of breath, but ... no fear. Not really.

Jaconit stood, letting the dry rasp of his movements announce him. The boy's blond head turned slowly. His eyes met Jaconit's. He began to weep and covered his face with his hands.

"I am in Hell," the boy whispered, his voice agonized.

"Nonsense." The single word shocked the boy silent. He stared open-mouthed at Jaconit. "What is your name, boy?"

"Keppler, Rudolph, Radar Tech, 1st class ..." the boy said automatically and then fell silent again, sensing the irrelevance in his words. Again and again, he trailed his eyes over Jaconit's form, staring first at the hooked claws, up the thin, hard body, and around to the congealed glowing mass of the retracted gill-wing, before looking into the face. He smiled tentatively.

"You are not afraid. Are you?" Jaconit said, curious.

"I don't know."

"It is ... unusual. Listen." The sound had become subliminal at first, but it was clear now. A cacophony of screams and crying echoed around the Sphere. It was always this way.

"The others are waking," Jaconit explained.

"Others?"

"Your ... crew."

The cries became louder. The boy watched open-mouthed as one of the People launched itself from the niche directly above, into the void, a man clutched gently in its claws and the gill-wing spread wide and thin to cup the air. The human's face radiated utter terror, the mouth wide open, screaming. For a moment, eyes met across the gap and the man reached toward the boy, begging, sobbing. Then they were gone.

"Commander Vogt," the boy whispered.

"A friend?"

"No."

Two hundred metres out and below, floating shapes were dropping men onto the platform, a growing crowd, nearly fifty by now, who scrambled for the centre of the group when they fell.

"I'm going to take you there now. Try not to struggle." The boy nodded uncertainly. Jaconit lifted off the



niche and carefully encircled the boy's waist with a claw. They drifted downward, one of the very last. Many eyes watched as Keppler was set down. After a moment he bowed to Jaconit in thanks.

"You are welcome," Jaconit said, and stretched his dark face in a fair imitation of a smile. He noted the slight fading of fear in a few faces as he spoke, and hatred and loathing in others. He lifted away as Buchazza landed on the edge of the platform.

The old member of the People shrunk his gill-wing to an innocuous ball behind him. He stood quietly until the mutters and cries of the humans had faded to silence and all were watching him.

"You were all dead," he called softly. "Now you are alive to be part of a larger destiny. We will help you. Listen to us, attempt to understand what we want of you." He stopped, as if waiting, eyes scanning the front row of faces. "It will be difficult. Each of you will have one of us to guide you. Listen and do as we tell you —"

"They do as I tell them," a harsh voice called out from the group. A man stepped out toward the thing called Buchazza. A face tough with years of the sea, set rigidly in control. Fear spasmed behind the mask, but was held back by sheer will.

Buchazza stood silently.

"Thomas Vogt, Commander, *Deutschland Kreigsmarine*, executive officer, *Bismark*." The words, the litany, seemed to calm the man and give him strength. He drew himself up. "I demand that we be released!"

Buchazza stood silently for several moments. "You were dead. Now you are with us. There it ends. Prepare yourselves."

He lifted, followed by the others. They drifted away, merging with the dark walls of the Sphere. Only the men stood there now, whispering fiercely.

"All of you, quiet!" Vogt shouted. "Sit! Sit down!"

Discipline was good. In moments only the hollow pulse of the chamber could be heard. The sailors listened to it fearfully, clutching their knees. All except Vogt, who stood looking at the men. The boy sat near him, watching.

"This is obviously some Tommie trick, probably to fool us into revealing information. Say nothing, not even names."

Keppler snorted audibly. Vogt's eyes leapt to him, black, deadly.

"Say nothing. Is that understood?" A few loud ayes and many uncertain nods; the group fractured into parts as old cliques re-established themselves. A tight knot of five or six officers gathered around Vogt, their heads bent in conversation. One or two looked at Keppler as they spoke, and he backed away to avoid their attention.

"Always insubordinate ..." he heard faintly. "Radar technician, remember him?" Keppler turned his back on them.

He wandered to the edge of the platform and lay down to look under it. Thin, a featureless disc of metal warm to the touch, less than a metre thick. The lack of any support bothered him.

"Quite a show the Tommies have put on, eh?" he

heard above him. He rolled over.

A familiar face: Vernon, grinning in a frightened face.

"Careful," Keppler said. "You'll get into as much trouble as I am with sarcasm like that."

"I know enough to shut my mouth around Vogt," Vernon said. His red hair was ridiculous, dried to spikes by salt water.

"He's an asshole."

"Rudeee —!" Vernon looked around tensely.

"We're not in the Navy anymore, Vern," Keppler said solemnly. "You know that."

Vernon nodded, hunching his shoulders. "What are those things, Rudi? And where are we?"

"I don't know."

"I remember falling from the catapult and ... and sinking. It was so cold, and then it wasn't cold anymore ..."

Keppler patted Vernon's leg reassuringly. They sat together quietly while hours passed and the thirst and hunger got worse. Men began pissing off the edge of the platform. The light began to dim, and Keppler wondered if that meant it was growing dark ... outside. He had no idea where he was. In that moment the space was full of the creatures again, each soaring over their heads on a single, glowing wing. There was less noise this time; most of the men watched silently. Buchazza landed again.

"Each of us will take two or three of you. Do not struggle. We will not harm you."

"Stay close," Keppler whispered to Vernon. There was a gentle scraping behind them and they turned. Vernon's eyes went wide with terror. Jaconit smiled at Keppler.

"A friend?"

"Yes."

"Then I will take you both."

The gill-wing stretched, reached out, a bubble growing until it surrounded all three of them, with Jaconit seemingly pressed against one side. The sounds of men crying out were suddenly dulled as the bubble closed behind them. It was a highly translucent skin. Keppler poked it experimentally with a finger; the stuff stayed rigid even while it expanded around them. "Sit, or lie down," Jaconit said. "It is safer."

"What's happening?" Keppler asked nervously. The bubble was only six feet across; he could feel Vernon squeezing back from the creature, endlessly scraping his feet against the slickness of the skin as he tried to push away.

"Purge. We are leaving the planet."

Keppler's jaw dropped. Pressure; a wet blanket of weight forced him to his knees, still looking into Jaconit's face. He saw the creature's eyes close and the long, bony hands come together in an attitude of prayer.

It lasted a very long time. Minutes, hours. Keppler lay on his back, choking slightly on his own saliva, feeling his bones push out of the flesh.

Then it was gone, abruptly, and something even worse took its place: vertigo, a spiny ball in his guts, endless falling. Vernon was screaming silently, turn-

ing end over end through the air with his hands clamped over his eyes. He felt his gorge rising, and his mind began to slip.

A dry hand closed over his wrist, warm and scaly. The creature was watching him carefully, hard mouth tight with concern. Then it smiled. God, the thing looked *human*!

"Everything will be all right," it said to him, and he laughed a little at its atrocious accent even through his nausea. But the hand was gentle, and the caring in the thing's face was real as he closed his eyes to fall into an exhausted pit of sleep.

II
He hadn't seen the sky for months. All he knew now was rock. Rock and more rock that he and the others cut into with strange tools he had never seen before: a pistol-gripped device that sliced the rock with hot, blinding light, and humming machines that turned the cold stone to a wind of dust. No one was forced to work, but those who worked got food, and blankets to pad the hollows they slept in; even a little brandy that tasted vile.

One of the People came floating down the shaft, featherlight and natural in the lack of gravity that made most of the men thrash around in clumsy hops.

Across the shaft, Vogt and another officer pulled themselves against the wall in exaggerated distaste, and a few followers aped him. Keppler had narrowly escaped one beating at their hands, only to be cornered the next day out of sight of any of the People. Jaconit had sealed his broken ribs himself, and the ruptured knuckle that had smashed Vogt's cheek open.

"You command no longer," Buchazza had told Vogt patiently, in front of all of them. "No man need obey you any longer." The man had stared straight ahead, not meeting the creature's eyes, not acknowledging the words at all.

A few of them had died. Accidents. An explosion of trapped gas that had killed one man and seemingly vaporized several tools; they were nowhere to be found. This worried the creatures, since they collected the dangerous things at the end of each shift. One man had suddenly erupted in massive skin lesions, and several of the People had gathered around him, murmuring, a strange note of concern in their voices. They had been expecting something, he was certain about that. They were easy to read. Too easy. Keppler was bright enough to realize that beings from another world would probably have ... other-worldly traits. But they were just like him. They smiled, they cried, they laughed. A few even joked. Like this one, who had taken a queer name, for his own reasons: Bartonn-Hayes.

"Do you fear my venomous bite, Commander?" the

creature called to Vogt, who scowled and turned away. The dark, recessed eyes turned to scan the end of the tunnel, inspecting the work, nodding in satisfaction at the large jumble of metallic ore stored to one side.

"What do you use the metal for?" Keppler asked quickly.

He was bored, and tired of digging, hoping for a distraction. Bartonn-Hayes looked at him.

"What do you think?" the creature asked.

Keppler coughed, stalling. "Umm ... obviously you're building something."

"Yes?" There was a definite gleam in the thing's eyes.

"Something large. Complex, too. We've found at least six different ores here."

"Would you like to see it?" Bartonn-Hayes asked, unmistakably grinning now. Keppler's jaw dropped.

"Y-Yes. Of course. Yes! But I thought ..."

"You're not prisoners here, you know."

You can explore anytime you like. Just have to ask."

Keppler turned wildly to the rest of them, his shipmates eavesdropping nearby, his face alive with excitement and invitation. It died slowly as one by one they turned away from him to face the rock and each other. Only Vernon looked at him, fidgeting nervously. Then he reluctantly launched himself and glided up beside them.

Bartonn-Hayes looked at him with a gentle smile on its hard lips, thoughtful.

"Follow me," it said, and pushed off down the tunnel. Keppler followed, thumping Vernon's arm enthusiastically and reaching for the next handhold. They went out and out, passing the chambers where they slept, watching the tunnel become smoother and more refined. What would be about two miles swimming, Keppler thought. Bartonn-Hayes stopped suddenly at a glowing comma shape embedded in one wall.

"No air beyond this point. Ah, here is Jaconit."

Keppler waved. The creature visited him often, although they never really talked very much. They were like two people who sensed an affinity but couldn't identify it.

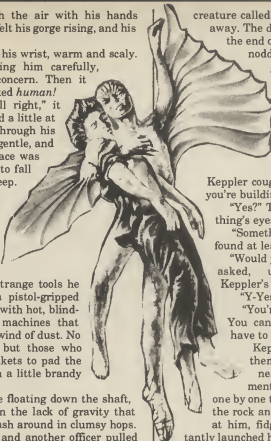
"Your first time outside, hmm?" Jaconit said.

"Outside?" Vernon asked. "So we are underground."

Bartonn-Hayes and Jaconit laughed: dry chuckles from leathery throats.

"You come with me," Bartonn-Hayes said to Vernon, and began to expand his gill-wing. "We have some sightseeing to do."

Minutes later, they were coasting through the tunnel, Keppler seated with his arms around his shins on the bottom of Jaconit's bubble of membrane. The creature gave a little grunt of effort, and the opaque gray of the tissue faded to transparency. Keppler gasped. It seemed he was floating in air, with only the reassur-



ing knobiness of Jaconit's knees to keep back vertigo. They weren't in the tunnel anymore. Hundreds of metres below, a black, pockmarked landscape flowed by, etched along the edges by sunlight.

He looked up to a horizon that was too close, too clear and personal.

"Your astronomers call it Ceres. Largest of the asteroids."

The last bit of doubt left Keppler. This was no trick, no dream. He was in space, away from the Earth. The concept was almost impossible for him to understand. Black night with hard, steady points of light hammered it again and again into his soul.

"Where is home?" he asked in a small voice. A clawed hand touched his shoulder, and pointed to a brilliant speck.

"So far?" he said, still almost whispering.

They watched the point silently. Keppler looked over his shoulder up to the face of the creature. Some strange emotion showed through the hard veneer of its face.

Eventually Jaconit looked down. "This is not what we came to see." They began to accelerate, down and away from the glare of the sun, and Keppler saw that they were headed for the far side of the huge mass, into the shadow. The moment the sun dropped below the horizon, it became clear that something floated behind the asteroid. Something gigantic.

"It's a ship," he said in awe.

Squashed hexagons connected again and again to form a cylindrical skeleton, with nodes glued on at random, like nits on hair. A cloud of motes surrounded the thing, and Keppler realized suddenly that they were People in their bubble environments. The scale of the ship jumped out at him. Each of the nodes was the size of the *Bismarck*. The entire German fleet would have fit into the tip of the cylinder.

"Is this what you came in?" Keppler asked. Shivers were running down his back, and his skin itched madly. The shock of seeing the thing ...

"No. Others did. We have spent the better part of four millennia ... modifying it. That is why you work here. There is never enough metal to finish all we would like to do."

"Then it's for leaving," Keppler said, scratching furiously. Jaconit looked at him oddly. "Where will you go? Another planet?"

Jaconit smiled. "No. Some of us are already there. This is for a much longer trip." He pointed again, to a small cluster of stars. "There, the smallest one. A star almost exactly like this one. Delta Pavonis, humans call it."

"But why?! What's there? What — ahg!" the itch peaked suddenly, and he tore at the skin of his arms. He stared at the spot in sudden dawning horror.

"My god ... it's the same thing Arens had. Isn't it? IT! IT!" He looked around wildly, feeling trapped.

"We'd best get you back," he heard faintly, as if through a long tunnel. He remembered only fragments after that, Jaconit speaking to Bartonn-Hayes, a whispered hurried flurry of words, and then the dim perception of time and distance passing him by. Vernon's face flashed past his through two transpar-

ent membranes. Something was wrong with it, as if a dark dye had spilt across his fair skin.

He woke up to the sound of screams, moans of terror reverberating around the familiar stone of the sleeping area. The sounds tore him off the pads and he drifted into the centre of the space, flailing his arms and feeling stupid. Now he would have to wait to drift across. But the moment he willed himself back, his drift checked, then reversed, as if a wind had suddenly blown against him. He turned his head and saw Bartonn-Hayes watching him from where he had slept.

"It comes naturally to you. That's good," the creature said, and he smiled. The twisting of the hard flesh pricked Keppler's memory, and he brought his hand to his face to feel hard leather, scaled and resilient.

"I always wondered why you were so much like us," Keppler said, staring at his rudimentary claws, fighting the surge of horror inside him. He looked up. "It's against nature. It's ... it's against God!"

"I once thought that, too," Bartonn-Hayes said. "God-fearing Englishman that I was, I could face Bonney's cannon at Trafalgar, but I couldn't accept that."

Keppler looked around. "All of them?"

"Yes. You were the first to go. Except for Arens. Too early for him. The virus hadn't changed his metabolism enough yet. It happens sometimes."

"I don't — feel different."

"Of course not. It's a reliable process. Did you think a butterfly would feel strange in its body, crawling from the cocoon? The danger comes from your mind. You have to accept what has happened to you."

Keppler closed his eyes. "I have to sleep."

"Yes. Sleep. Don't resist the process. This leads to irrationality."

"Why?" Keppler asked weakly, and was asleep before the answer came.

He could feel the changes when he woke again. He felt thin, taut, totally balanced. Instantly, without doubt, he knew where he was and who was around him. The sheer power of his awareness staggered him. Then he caught the scent: fear, rage, the tension of words held back. He opened his eyes.

Vogt had changed, too, but it was less pronounced. His form was still human, still awkward and heavy, the scaling scattered through his limbs and into the torso. His face was slightly darkened and his eyes ... his eyes were mad.

His one fore-arm was around one of the People's throat. Tania, he saw, Jaconit's mate, though he knew instinctively from his own body that he would never mate again. This was a neutered form.

Vogt held one of the lost digging tools against Tania's head. The glowing comma on the wall shone over her shoulder.

"Finally awake, you bastard!" Vogt rasped in a crazed voice. "I want you to see it when I kill you." Thirty or forty of the People hovered in a sphere around Vogt. Keppler saw Jaconit beside him, saw the pain on his face, so much clearer now, not at all muted the way it had seemed before.

"Let her go," he said.

"Shut up. Come here, traitor."

"No," said Tania. "You will kill no one. If you do, I will not take you back. We leave now." Keppler heard the familiar lilt in her words, the same accent as Jaco'nit's, and Buchazza's, something older than the Pyramids; Gilgamesh would have had a voice like that. He saw Jaco'nit tense and Tania's eyes turn toward him. Then her gill-wing expanded and surrounded Vogt and her, blocking out the black rage on the man's face.

They drifted across the invisible boundary into vacuum.

And stopped, as they had all expected.

He could suddenly hear what was going on inside that opaque sphere, as if a switch had come on in his head. Vogt's rage, Tania's quiet refusal, and then the instant flash of expended energy that collapsed the bubble. The two bodies tumbled slowly away through a red mist of blood.

Jaco'nit turned away from their eyes.

III

Even the years passed differently now. He missed the pulse of the seasons. He found himself straying toward the inner system just to see the blue and white of the Earth. Sometimes Jaco'nit would join him on those week-long jaunts, silent beside him, although the others frowned silently at their wasting of time. It hurt the Cause, he knew. He felt that urge to finish the ship and MOVE ON, but it just wasn't as strong in him as it was in the others.

Vernon. Gentle, timid Vernon was consumed by it, even though he knew it was just instinct, just the virus trying to start the next cycle of its vast lifetime.

Bartonn-Hayes met him one day, waiting at the corner of a tunnel.

"Come with me," he said, and Keppler followed. They entered a deep chamber warmly lit with red light, and Bartonn-Hayes stopped; Keppler was mildly surprised to see the normally flippant creature bow his head in respect.

Something moved out of the shadows; it had the scaled skin and the pulsing gill-wing of the People, but there resemblance ended. Six limbs, all more or less the same size, on an elongated, horizontal torso, one end teeming with black eyes. It had never walked the face of the Earth, even before the virus had changed it. How far had it come? Keppler looked at it in pity, understanding the loneliness it must feel so far from home, and knowing suddenly he could never go any farther than he already was away from the Earth.

"Brother," he heard in his mind. "You do not burn to leave this place."

"No."

"There were some of my kind who were like you. It is good that some stay. In this way we can use the thing that uses us." Keppler frowned uncertainly.

"The virus is parasitical, there's no doubt," Bartonn-Hayes said. "But a few like you always develop in every star system it infests. Who knows why? You want to stay, and we can use that to help the humans that follow us into space ... as humans. In this

way our species benefits as well. It's been this way forever."

"Help? How?"

"Listen, brother ..."

The fusion flame would be visible on Earth for over two years as it brought the ship up to ramscoop velocity. No one could miss it. It would shine like a miniature moon, only brighter. There was bound to be some kind of manned probe sent up; they'd just reached that level down there, even a landing on the moon. Keppler's head swam with the flood of knowledge of two species and ten thousand years that had poured into him at the last gathering. There was so much he would be able to tell the humans who eventually came to meet them: how to survive in space — a task more difficult than they apparently thought from what he'd seen in their entertainment broadcasts.

Hopefully they wouldn't destroy him in instinctive revulsion and fear; but then again, that was his job. He was the modern one, the one who would relate to these new technological humans. As he waited, he tried to conjure up basic feelings and thoughts, again and again forcing himself back into the soft-skinned, sexual, impatient mindset. It was hard.

Jaco'nit floated beside him, his mind as full as his, his body purged of the virus, too, so that there would be no more of the People here.

"I'm sorry for what Vogt did," Keppler said, finally able to acknowledge the guilt he felt. He was alive because of Tania.

Jaco'nit shrugged. "To him, we were an enemy. Most who cannot accept the change merely destroy themselves. He was a soldier. In his mind he did an honorable thing."

They floated silently for a long time.

"She was beautiful," Jaco'nit said. "Clever beyond belief. She took to the change so much better than I. She kept me sane through it." He looked at Keppler, and his smile was only a little bitter. "Now you will have to keep me sane."

"Agreed," Keppler said. "But you wanted to stay, even before, didn't you?"

Jaco'nit nodded. He hesitated, then said quietly, "I could never forget the smell of the sea, and blue sky, and the feel of smooth skin, warm from the sun. That was how I remembered her. I can't leave that now. I ... I must feel that again, at least in part."

The words triggered a memory in Keppler: standing by the rail of the *Bismarck*, moments before he jumped into the freezing sea, staring at the clouds and the shreds of blue sky peering through, and trying to fix them in his mind before he died, to carry them into death. And having the strength to carry those last thoughts into his new form. Maybe that was why he had been able to resist the virus's last assault on him, the infestation of his will. He didn't really care anymore.

Months later, an indistinct flare of chemical fuel blurred the upper atmosphere of the planet. Finally, they're coming, he thought. He turned to Jaco'nit and said, "It'll be good to go home." □

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A New Set of Wheels

First, the sad news. You may have noticed some irregularity in these alien transmissions of late. It is my regrettable duty to inform those who monitor this space that the One initially responsible for this task has reached critical — that is, the One found himself overwhelmed by certain facets of your peculiar — that is, the One's warning beacon was being triggered with alarming regularity, causing the neighbors to — no, none of these descriptions do the situation justice. How to explain? While there is no exact word in your language, there are certain concepts — vacation, retirement, lobotomy, macarena — that perhaps if you were to retain some aspect of all four, you might approach the truth as to the One's current whereabouts, both physically and spiritually.

There were other factors involved. Those who regularly visit this space know of the One's close association with a certain "Ryan." It was a relationship that was both adversarial and oddly necessary, similar perhaps to such examples, drawn from your popular culture, as Holmes and Moriarty, or Mr. Whipple and She who Squeezes the Charmin.

Still, however, my predecessor attempted to find a secure channel for these missives free of Ryan, turning first to a particular home page of that primitive communication pattern known as the "World Wide Web," hiding his communications under the heading "New Pictures of Fluffy." Ryan and his minions found it easily.

Next, the One attempted to insert the message in the backbeat of something called "The Spice Girls." Unfortunately, the One did not realize that no one over 13 Extal Revolutions upon the home world could bear to listen to these Spice beings, and the message might have been lost completely, had Ryan and his crew not somehow found it.

Eventually, it all became too much for the poor alien, who had taken to repeatedly muttering the phrase "Must-See TV" and singing that song about everyday people. It was a sorry sight.

But for those who have been faithfully following these missives, the task must go on, for the sake of civilization itself, not to mention what passes for civilization on Planet Earth. And I have been chosen to continue it.

Upon review of my predecessor's work, it occurs to me that perhaps the One who went before had taken the wrong approach, had, shall we say "not been able to cut the mustard" (Note how easy it is to adapt to Earth's

idioms. Or, as they say, "Twenty-three skidoo. So's your old man. Dad's the chef. My parents went to Disney World and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.")

But I digress.

Since it is quite obvious that there is no way to keep Ryan and his crew from getting their paws all over these missives, perhaps we should use this forum to facilitate communication between our species. Therefore, I have decided to experiment. So you of Earth might know a bit more of our culture, I have combined words in your primitive tongue as I did describing the One's condition/fate above.

I hope to use these combinations to



grow closer to the proper abstract concepts as used upon my Homeworld, so that we might foster a greater sense of understanding between our cultures.

As I mentioned before, I have been chosen to continue the important task of reporting upon Earth "culture." In our society, such appointments are often based on a complicated combination of merit, heredity, and not being able to come up with a quick enough excuse. Suffice it to say I was chosen in part because of my relationship to the One who went before. But how to define that relationship? In human terms, you might therefore call me the One's niece/nephew/Subaru, while the One who preceded me would of course be my uncle/aunt/Ford Explorer. By the logical extension of this argument, Ryan would then become this column's

advisor/sidekick/confessor/devil's advocate/Chevy Nova.

What could be simpler?

Already, I can feel the warm glow of understanding suffusing my exoskeleton. It is most profound upon my lower extremities. I smile as some of Ryan's assistants/employees/helpless pawns/Plymouth Neons gather around me. Truly, this is the beginning of a new era of cooperation between our cultures.

What is that smell?

The Neons around me laugh at my question, informing me that I am the subject of a quaint Earth custom.

It is something about a foot! A scorched tootsie? A sizzling flipper? And burning. Burning is definitely in there. The smoke makes it somewhat difficult to concentrate.

Ah. A hot foot!

It appears to be an Earth ritual, whereby I am finally accepted. Or excepted. Or exerted. Possibly exhausted. It is difficult to discern shades of meaning when one is screaming and hopping about on one appendage. No doubt I will be glad for this bonding experience, once I have fully healed.

But wait! What happened to the dirty smudge on my shoe lace? Despite the fire, my lace is distressingly clean!

What? Ryan and his crew have discovered my real report? Yes, the smiling Neons inform me. And next time, they'll print my no-longer-hidden missive in this very space!

These Neons are everywhere. There appears to be no way to escape their scrutiny.

I am trapped. No, that is my hot foot talking; or at least what remains of the foot after the laughing Neons have extinguished the fire. I have a job to do, and must remain responsible to my superiors/tyrants/large, smoke-belching Greyhound buses.

After all, someone has to watch over Ryan and his troops. I will survive. And I will report. No matter what mental fortitude, what heroic indifference, what games of misdirection it may take.

With every passing minute upon the job, I grow to more fully appreciate the One's struggles, and those behaviors he used to survive.

Think about it, you Neons! Why do you single me out for your initiation rituals? I am only here to observe — no, not even that! I am here to blend in, become one of your culture! Be part of the gang! Keep up with the Joneses! Yeah, that's the ticket!

Perhaps my predecessor had a point.

I — I — I am everyday people. □

Perfection

By Stuart Palmer

Art by Jael

"My name is Ti Enna. I am nineteen years old. I am a great lover of things that are beautiful. I love to work for Max Boukman. He has made me beautiful."

On the eve of Summer, my father came to the villa. I ran to greet him at the gates. In the musky shade of the loco tree, his yellow eyes were wax, straining to conceal suspicion and distrust. He dressed in muddy denims. They held the fust of damp towels.

"Ti Enna?" he said. "Ti Enna, is that you?"

"Yes, Father." I stood as I had been instructed, feet arranged to exhibit the gentle curvature of my calves, face positioned to emphasize the delicate features of my face. "Why have you come?"

"I dreamt ... I dreamt of you," he said. "You're so changed."

I gazed down on his brittle body and forgot my stance. He was small, fur graying on face and arms, the pinched skin around his eyes as pale as almond paste. His mouth was tight.

"It's part of my training," I said.

"But your face ..."

"Max operated ... to make it appealing." I looked away. "How is my sister?"

"Ti Kershin is well enough." His head tilted to the dust. "See what I've done to you, Ti Enna. You no longer look like ... You're no longer hehytian."

My pained eyes lifted to the cruelly cropped tree. I remembered the day my father delivered me to the villa. His jaw firm, he had not spoken on the journey. He had held my hand but walked alone, eyes squinting, to the iron gates, face impassive as it had often been since Mother's death. I'd felt irresolute, afraid. Dressed in denims, fur prickling with nervous excitement, my eyes were yellow and wide.

Father had woven great word-dreams. He'd told me I was the future, and walked tall that day, but his pride had seemed a hollow thing. And as we reached the gates, his angular face had turned away. "You'll find hope here," he'd said. "More so than on the land. Zaka the peasant god understands." My fifteen-year-old head had nodded, stricken, and surveyed the cropless lands.

Then Max had taken me.

I heard the screen door slap shut behind me.

"Enna! Stand properly. I haven't spent time and money for you to send it to ruin."

Crossing the courtyard in rapid strides was

Max Boukman. Sunlight glowed in his spectacles and shadows pooled in the pockmarks of his face.

He touched my skin almost tenderly. "Get inside, Enna."

"But ..." I gestured to my father.

"Get inside. She knows how long I allow her outside each day, Kye Atibon, and she has already exceeded it by five minutes." His hand raised and stroked my cheek in a brisk examination. "Do you want to resemble a dried apricot?"

My head lowered in submission. He had explained the drying, cancerous properties of the sun. He'd made it sound worse than the death rattle of the Guede.

I said, "Goodbye, Father."

He made no reply, but dolorously watched my retreat to the villa. There was something in his expression that hurt, a distance, a smallness, a last tatter of pride. Closing the screen door, I felt an ache of separation in my throat, an awkwardness in my altered bones.

Max and my father talked. I watched them from the sparsely furnished lounge. Behind them, through the basket arches that described the courtyard, I saw mountains, lilac and frosted with cloud. Dusty fields of dah grass stretched beneath them, shacks and shelters decaying where choked water channels cut the soil.

"You shouldn't irritate Max," said Ti Leop. She wore satin trousers, elegant figure draped carefully against the door to the holo studio, breasts bandaged after her most recent operation.

"I was talking to my father."

"Max knows best." She walked as we had been trained to walk, stood at my shoulder. "He's famous, an artist. He has the expertise to make us the best."

"He has made us the best," I said, not daring to take my eyes from my father's slight form.

"And look at the holoscreens. Look at them, Ti Enna." Her manicured hand swept round the room, indicating a dozen frames. Smooth models moved within them, captured like animals. They were people who understood the arena we were to enter. Their eyes held joy, hope, and the secret of dreams. They advertised their bodies and consumer goods.

"We'll be like that," said Ti Leop, wincing at the pain beneath her wraps. "One day the whole



of Max's world will adore us, pay for us. We'll be the finest. Neon lights. Glamour, beauty, the cars he spoke of. The hol-vision ..."

"Holovision," I corrected.

She repeated the word and lowered her head, ashamed to be found imperfect.

I smoothed the dress, feeling the sheer silk against my skin. The allure of my alien eyes, the irresistible pout of full lips, the gloss of auburn hair; I had been told these things made me feel good because they made me good.

"Lovely, Enna, lovely." Max steamed close, face set in an obsessive trance. Once that face had scared me. Now other things scared me. His long fingers adjusted the line of the dress, the fall of my hair, the position of my mouth. "You are the most beautiful, Enna," he said. "After twenty years of work, you're my finest. Earth, the colonies ..." His hand waved airily. "They'll adore you."

I did not dare to move. The faint odor of dust on hot bulbs, a paper smell, permeated the studio. More immediate was the perfume of cosmetics. They still felt unnatural on my skin. My lips were greasy. Max had taken four hours to perfect me for the session. I watched him retreat to the holocamera relay, stooped low like a marsh crab, ready to activate the slave sequence.

"Give it something special!" he said.

I turned, swept back my hair.

"Yes," he said. "Near perfect. Here on Hehyti, away from the corrupting visions of Earth ... Oh, Enna, you can't know the pleasure of the challenge ... My finest challenge."

My back arched, arms curled, then stiffened.

"Enna," he said, warningly. "I don't see that sparkle. Give me that sparkle?"

Trying so hard to realize his dream, my face tightened.

"Enna!" He marched forward. Fingers seized my jaw, swung my head from side to side. "You're beautiful, Enna. More than Leop, more than Gaenal, you're my finest creation. Tell me how beautiful you are. Tell me!"

As he stalked the immaculate whiteness of the studio, I let my focus drift to the windows in the next room. The delicate peach of the sky and the vivid orange of dah fields seemed distant.

Reciting the litany, not hearing the words, I said, "My name is Ti Enna. I am nineteen years old." A rich slice of field was just visible from the window. "I am a great lover of things that are beautiful. I love to work for Max Boukman. He has made me beautiful."

His head shook vigorously. I felt the ugliness that comes with failure. Thorns of disquiet and loss lodged in my chest.

"I've worked hard to be the best, Enna." He

brushed me away from the backdrop, as though he feared contamination. "Don't insult me. Go to the gym. Work. Recite the mantra." He pushed me through the arch into the lounge. Ti Leop was arranged on the sofa in a lace kimono, breasts healed. My head lowered. I felt like a stupid child, sins displayed for ridicule.

"I can't be expected to do everything," said Max. "I own your heart and soul, Enna. I own them, but you have to give them, too. Recite the mantra." Fierce green eyes turned to Ti Leop. "Come."

Like a snake entranced, she rose from the sofa. She walked through to the studio with languid grace. He followed, fussing with the curl of her hair.

I was alone, humiliated, filled with the dull ache of rejection. As I hesitated in the lounge, I heard Ti Leop recite her mantra.

"My name is Ti Leop. I am seventeen years old, Max has taught me to be beautiful, I owe Max everything. He has made me beautiful ..."

My gaze returned to the fields. Walking to the door, I heard Max's strangled voice from the studio: "You, Leop! You are the most beautiful. When I leave this self-imposed exile, when I present you to Earth, you'll be the triumph of purity and perfection ..."

As the sun became corpulent and heavy, I walked the paths on the fields' edges. Max had reshaped my feet, made them unsuitable for padding across marshy soil. A linen shawl protected my skin, drawn up in a hood to conceal my face. In the dah grass, harvesters gathered their tools to return to the hutments. They carried the body of a hehytian, mouth packed with grass, eyes covered with soil, a sweetmeat for the flies.

Feeling dust in my shoes and throat, I wandered eastward, always with an eye on the villa behind me. Incongruous in the wide, flat farmlands, the villa was a white beacon, a symbol of the excesses that once ravaged my world.

On the eastern edge of the basin was a ruined town called Erzulie. When our world had prospered, Erzulie had been a colonial settlement. The bars had pulsed with music and young life made frenzied by dreams. Now I walked the sandy streets, glimpsed rusted signs for Coca-Cola in doorways, touched flaking plaster long ago scarred by bullets.

I sat on a broken window sill. In my mind I felt the lost warmth of childhood. In a shack of broken hoardings, my parents had huddled me close. Baby Kershin had nestled in the crook of my mother's arm, bedded down against shrieking Guede and the threat of the typhoon.

On those long nights, my father's eyes had

glistened in the fire glow. He had recounted stories of the colonists, of the dream they had shared, of the move for independence and the death the colonists had dealt so freely as the battles began. He spoke of guerrillas, bombings, chemical defoliants.

"Bad times, Ti Enna," he'd said. "We saw their dreams, forgot our own, and craved everything they were. And we destroyed it all. We saw a dream of prosperity and unity, and some lived that dream while the colonists had will to share. Only in war, as lives and money were torn apart, only then did our folly show." He'd touched the fur on my mother's neck. "Only then was pride a hollow shell."

He had told me the stories to recreate an identity destroyed by the withdrawal, the economic collapse, the coups that had followed. We were left to subsist at a level known some sixty years before the Earthers' arrival.

Now I felt no identity. I was Enna, a hybrid alone. Robbed of my people's form and dreams, I felt the empty place inside where pride had once encamped.

Lowering long, smooth legs to the dust, I walked the streets. Shadows were distended, the light amber. There were shattered neon signs and shredded posters. They advertised beer, clothes, utensils, the nightlife of Erzulie.

On the town's edge was an abandoned grain refinery, its tower casting a long finger over the dah fields. From here the colonists had watched the fields. Now it was broken, scarred by the bloodiest battle of the war. My people had made it a shrine to Damballah, god of life. Fragrant garlands adorned the door. Each day they were renewed by women from the hutments.

A parody of myself reflected in the metal wall. Lowering my head, I began to recite the god's hymn. "Master Damballah, where are you? Don't you see I'm at the reef? Master Damballah, where are you? Don't you see I'm on the sea?"

I stopped, aware of another voice in the refinery. It was soft and familiar, plaintive and small.

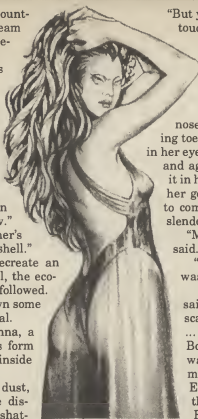
"I've a rudder in my hand, I can't go back. I'm already going forward, I can't go back," my sister continued.

She raised her head, and I drank in the almond-roundness of her eyes, her soft-furred cheeks and wide forehead.

"Ti Kershin," I whispered.

She said my name, and I heard a question distressed and anguished in her tone: "What happened to you?"

"It's part of the process," I said.



"But your eyes ..." Her hand raised to touch my cheek, faltered, and withdrew. "They're so white ... He's changed your eyes."

"It's called pigmen ... I can't remember what Max calls it, but ..."

"And your cheeks.. so hairless, nose so thin, feet so scrawny, missing toes. Oh, Ti Enna ...?" Tears shone in her eyes. She repeated my name again and again, as though striving to hold it in her thoughts. I saw fear crumple her gentle features. When I reached to comfort her, she shrank away, so slender in her pale pinafore.

"Max says he's perfecting me," I said. She wept into her hands.

"Ti Kershin, how did you know I was here?"

"I saw you leave the villa," she said. "I followed ... but I was scared ... You were changed, like ... like the shape of Max Boukman. Like images on the walls of this town." Pleading eyes met my own. "I have dreams, Ti Enna. The future should be more than waiting for the past. I know Father's arranged for me to go to Boukman next year. I'm so

afraid, Ti Enna ... so afraid ..."

And as we held each other, I felt her fear.

"**W**ork harder, Enna. Harder!" Max swept close, face filled with anger and impatience. His teeth clenched, exaggerating the angular line of his jaw. He tapped the crossbar of the rowing machine. His sweet breath was in my face on the upward motion. "Come on, Enna! I need sweat. Show me dedication in sweat."

I pressed harder, working faster, feeling pains in my abdomen and back, hunger in my stomach.

"Don't frown," he said. "Don't you dare frown and spoil it!"

Breakfast had been shredded carrot. My fingers slipped on the bar. Cord retracted, weights dropped. They slammed down into position with a thunder that only heightened my anxiety.

Max glared down like a teacher on an impertinent child. He said nothing, walked away between the apparatus to the far side of the gym. For long minutes he surveyed the fields beyond the villa.

"I do love you, Enna," he said. "I love you all. And because of that love, I need to perfect you. There'd be no joy in improving what I hate. It would only become more hateful, like the models

of Earth, everything on Earth."

"Why do you want to return?" I said, nervously.

"Because I'm a slave to the things I need to be," he said, flatly. "I need to be remembered." He turned from the window, eyes staring beyond me. "I could have stayed on Earth, Enna, I could have groped for perfection ... but the purity was lost. The model becomes a shell. I need more than a shell."

His hand stroked my neck, moved up to touch the chiseled line of my jaw. "We all strive to better ourselves, Enna. Beauty is never born."

I controlled my breathing, dried the sweat from my hands, and clasped the bar. Only as he saw it move did he step away.

"I think I'll trim the cheeks some more, accentuate the fullness of the lips," he said, voice detached again. He spoke about me, not to me. His fingers moved as though turning a scalpel. "At the weekend," he said. "Oh, yes, Enna. You'll soon be ready. The perfection of beauty. The challenge of perfecting it." He clapped sharply and hurried to my side. "Keep working. Feel the challenge, Enna. Don't you enjoy the challenge? This forgotten backwater is my finest canvas. When I return ... Oh yes. Think neon. Think beautiful."

He smiled wryly as he returned to the window. Below was the courtyard and the harshly pruned loco tree. "Nature has no perfection," he said. "Here I can transfigure the raw essence of being into pure artistry."

Kye Gaennal entered the gym. His eyes were bandaged and puffy, the skin mustard-colored and peppered with purple bruising.

"The perfection of nature and breeding," said Max.

Ti Leop scrutinized a magazine, admiring photographs and adverts. I watched her a while, felt quite alone, moved my attention to the landscape, circling carrion birds, harvesters in the field.

"Look at these things," said Ti Leop. She held up the magazine, displaying a double-spread of computer satellites, virtuals, and holovision. "I can't wait to see Earth. Just think of it. Just think of fame and success." She said the words like meaningless charms. My eyes drifted back to the dah harvesters.

"We don't belong there," I said.

"We will. Max can make us fit in. He'll make us perfect."

"We'll never belong." I plucked the magazine from her fingers and cast it across the veranda. "I saw my sister yesterday. She didn't recognize me."

Ti Leop shrugged with practiced nonchalance.

"We're so different now," I said. "We're not

hehayan."

"We're professional models."

"No." I searched for the harvesters, but they'd gone. "No, we're not. We're dreams, Ti Leop, we're nothing but dreams."

She turned her head and studied me.

"Not even our own dreams," I said. "We're Max's dreams, and the dreams of Earth, dreams of that magazine, of holovision."

"There's nothing wrong with that," she said.

"I want my own dreams."

She smiled ruefully. "What are they, Ti Enna? All I remember is survival."

"We have our own dreams," I said, "our own culture."

Her head shook slowly. "We have a memory of Earth, the colonists, the money that came with it. There's nothing but ghosts. We have a shrine to someone else's god built in the bones of someone else's past." She spoke like a chained slave. For a moment the glamour and paint fell away, and I saw the tenting and the need within her. "Every dream we have belongs to someone else, Ti Enna. Why do you think we go on living?"

"Tell me."

"Because we think someone will remember us. We're making ourselves ready."

"No," I said. "No, that isn't true." I felt the prickle of tears, saw in my mind my sister's disconsolate face.

She pulled another magazine from beneath the chair. "When all dreams are borrowed, Ti Enna, we should take the best ones. Who knows, one day we might become someone else's dream ..."

I ran the fields and channels to the shack of broken hoardings. My father stooped by the fire, spooning grain stew into his mouth from a rusted can.

"Father ..." I said, breathless, scared Max had seen my hurried departure.

He raised his head as though afraid. Tears rimmed his yellow eyes. And as his lips trembled and tears turned his eyes to jewels, I felt pity. Pity brought anguish, the chewing pain of separation. I felt alone.

"What have I done to you?" he said. "Oh, Ti Enna ..."

"Father ..." I dropped beside him, touched his shoulder, and felt the shake in his bones. For all my yearning to hold him close, I felt the difference and the divide. I sat impotent and hurt.

"There are things to tell," he sobbed. "How I've done you wrong. How I've destroyed you." He dropped the can to the dirt. "I was a proud man. I had a wife, daughters, the pride of a race made strong through dreams." He punched his chest to stem the tears. "I buried a wife, and I buried pride."

"When Boukman built his villa, I'd forgotten what made me proud. I wanted only the best ... for me ... for you ... Ti Kershin. Understand, I only ever wanted the best. I gave you to his dreams to save your dreams ... my dreams." He reached for my hand, but did not take it. "Would I had killed and buried you."

"Father?"

"I sold your bones, Ti Enna. I have taken reward for you and your sister."

A chill wormed beneath my shawl, crawled across my aching flesh. Too numb for tears, drawn into myself with pain and the addiction of isolation, I stared at him. I just stared.

"Don't forgive me, Ti Enna. Don't hurt me with my own shame. I heard Boukman's dreams and I saw our reality. I knew our own dreams ... The future will never realize them." Tears caught in the fur of his face. "I've made a slave of you, Ti Enna. I wish I'd killed you outright. I wish I'd prevented your living death with soil and grass."

I said, "I forgive you," and left him there to cry.

The operation on my cheekbones left deep bruises. Inflamed tissue round my lips cracked the skin. Talking was difficult. Yet the bruising inside was worse. I no longer cared to see fields and mountains. The smells of nature and Max's harsh pruning of the loco tree meant nothing. When the bandages were removed, he took me to the holostudio.

"Give me the mantra, Enna," he said. "Give it to me."

Unfocused desperation transformed my pale eyes. Without my own hope, I plundered the neon dream. Bitterness possessed me. I felt my face come alive with the dreamings and desires of strangers. "My name is Ti Enna," I said. "I am nineteen years old. I am a great lover of things that are beautiful. I love to work for Max Boukman. He has made me beautiful."

The slave cameras buzzed with life, stealing my soul, frantic to capture what I'd become.

"I am the dream of Max Boukman," I said. "I am the dream of Earth, the dream of the prostitute, the dream of prosperity, the dream of the Geude."

"Superb, Enna. More!"

"I am the perfection of generations. I am the dream of advertising, the dream of nature, the dream of the scalpel, the dream of the whore."

"Magnificent!" Max pressed hard on the relay system. The slave cameras circled me, the lights left me blind in their glare "Give me ..." He stopped and turned to the lounge door. Ti Leop nervously awaited his attention.

"Stand properly, Leop, Don't waste my time."

"You must come," she said flatly.

"Can't you see I'm busy?" He glared through his spectacles, then pushed the holocameras aside

and hurried from the studio.

Ti Leop hesitated. "You, too, Ti Enna."

We went to the veranda. I saw the blood first. It pooled at the young girl's feet, soaked the faded pinafore, glistened in the wounds in her face. They were deep cuts, livid gorges in the flesh at the mouth and eyes. The hair splayed in disquieting angles.

"Ti Kershin?" I said. "Ti Kershin!"

Tearfully, she stared from her one good eye.

"Who did this?" asked Max. "Tell me, girl."

"My father," she said. Her eye turned to me. "Our father."

"Bastard!" said Max. "Bastard!" Fists clenched, he swept into the villa. I heard doors slam, heard his tantrum rage through the rooms like a typhoon.

I stood with my sister, horrified by her mutilation, hypnotized by some hope in her eye.

"It's still me, Ti Enna," she said quietly. "I still have my dreams."

Now Max is ready to take us to Earth. He says his self-imposed exile is over, his work done. He claims Hehyti will rise, that there will be neon lights in Erzulie. He says he can make it perfect with hope and prosperity.

I know only desolation and the dreams that surround me.

My world sold its dreams to Earth. Earth left bullet scars and adverts for soft drinks. My father's dreams were of pride and family. They were broken by reality and infected by the vision of Boukman. Ti Leop took that vision and the dreams of Earth, hoping one day to become fantasy herself. Ti Kershin's hope became my father's new hope. Max made us all in the image of his dream.

I have reached perfection. I have no dreams. □

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First Timers

This issue's cover artist, **David W. Stann**, has been working professionally full time at his trade for three years. He said he is self-taught as an artist.

He said his work is primarily free lance, and he has done a variety of illustrations including sports, SF, and local historical pieces.

"Actually, I've been doing more lith-



Jeff Janoda

ographs than illustrations."

His first professional sale was this cover illustration to *Aboriginal*.

David's hobbies include computers and woodworking. He's most proud of the official 250th anniversary logo he did for the city of Reading, Penn. He said the logo's been put on all sorts of items including hats, coasters, and T-shirts. "It's all over the city."

He is married to **Laura Leonowitz** and they have one child, a six-month-old daughter.

"Infestations" is **Jeff Janoda's** second sale to *Aboriginal*; his first sale



Lubov

was "Hands Across the Stars," which appeared in issue 45-46.

An elementary school teacher in Ontario, Canada, **Jeff** writes in his spare time.

He is a "couple of hundred pages" into a novel with a working title of *One Good Ship*.

Married to **Jane Courtemanche**, they have two children, Maddy, 5, and



Stuart Palmer

Duncan, 2.

For other hobbies, **Jeff** is into Jiu Jitsu and he does "some camping and orienteering."

"I can survive anywhere with a knife and a compass (except maybe New York City)."

Recently **Jeff** "realized my five-year-old child will not remain a five-year-old child forever," a difficult stage for any parent.

"Infestations" is illustrated by **Lubov**.

Born in Leningrad, **Lubov** studied at the Nevsky School of Art. Seeking cultural and political freedom, she moved to the U.S. in 1980. Three years later she was accepted at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with a full four-year scholarship. Since graduating from the Art Institute, she has won awards for her work in various art exhibitions.

"Perfection," by **Stuart Palmer**, is about what people have to go through when they aren't born perfect.

Stuart made his first American sale to *Aboriginal* ("Meritorious Windows," issue 49-50).

He said "Perfection" was inspired by an article he read about an

American plastic surgeon who went to Russia to sculpt a number of Russian youth to become models because he could "have much more control over their lives there."

Stuart likes "all things smokable, edible, or drinkable," has a degree in theology "which is even more useless than it sounds," and "once spent a whole day as a model wearing a 1950s



Lois M. Gresh

ball gown at a local art college."

"Perfection," is illustrated by **Jael**, who has done a number of illustrations for *Aboriginal*.

During her drive to the Worldcon in San Antonio in August 1997, a number of illustrations were stolen from her van.

Her several classes in illustration for teenagers and adults are full, which means she is "tired but happy" these days.

"Algorithms and Nasal Structures," by **Lois M. Gresh**, delves into what extremes grad students may go to

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David W. & Laura Stann



Ben Jeapes

to finish their thesis.

Lois has undergraduate and graduate degrees in computer science and sold 10 stories the same year this story was accepted by *Aboriginal*.

Her first professional sales were made in 1993 to *Infinite Loop*.

She says she was secretly married in Las Vegas to someone named Aardvark, but we don't believe everything writers tell us.

Lois enjoys the blues, jazz guitar, and doing sketches of ridiculous things or people.

"Algorithms" is illustrated by **Larry Blamire**, who resides in Belmont, Mass., and enjoys acting and writing plays.

Larry has illustrated a number of stories for *Aboriginal*, including the one used as a basis for our Alien Publisher.

"Correspondents," by **Ben Jeapes**, tackles the consequences of time travel into the past (we don't want to give away the plot).

This was Ben's first sale to an American magazine, and he is one of those few people who actually make their living in publishing (as the managing editor of *Expert Systems*).

His hobbies include writing and being a church group leader, which he says is "very diverting."

He has had four stories published in *Interzone*.

"Correspondents" is illustrated by **Cortney Skinner**, who is happy to say everyone survived eating the chili at his annual Boskone party, held at his



Chris East



Joe Mayhew

home because the hotel would never serve chili like that.

Cortney's painting depicting a battle between an American airship and a German U-boat off the Florida Keys during the war appeared in a recent issue of the *Naval Aviation News*.

Cortney has also been involved in the research and painting of a similar encounter between a sub and a blimp off the New England coast, an accidental sinking which may have prolonged the war.

Cortney teaches art to some elementary school students one or two days a week and enjoys creating his own Christmas and special occasion cards.

"Nisi Granum Frumenti," by **Joe Mayhew**, wrestles with how different cultures interpret practices of religious belief.

A retired employee of the Library of Congress and active in Washington-area fandom, Joe was to chair this year's Disclave, but the convention was unfortunately undone, in large part by the off-duty activities of a New York City Police Lieutenant and his mistress at last year's Disclave.

A long-time fan artist, Joe regularly conducts panels at conventions discussing the merits of the illustrations in the art show.

He reviews books for Washington-area newspapers and has played a large role in getting equal representation for science fiction at the Library of Congress.

"Nisi" is illustrated by Cortney Skinner, who, though still enthralled by blimps, has found time to learn the use of Photoshop to do computerized illustrations.

The illustration for this story is one of his first computer-generated illustrations to be published.

Chris East made his first professional sale when *Aboriginal* bought "The Chaldron," which is about survival in a camp deliberately isolated from the rest of humanity.



David Riley

A fan of role-playing games, Chris likes the work of Philip K. Dick, John LeCarré, Lucius Shepard, Rudy Rucker, and K. W. Jeter.

Chris plays "a mean funk bass," is addicted to hockey, and has more than "120 episodes of *Mission Impossible* on tape."

"The Chaldron" is illustrated by **N. Taylor Blanchard**, who has done a number of illustrations for *Aboriginal* in the past.

Taylor enjoys skiing and riding his motorcycle and recently moved to New Jersey.

He is a regular at East Coast conventions and is preparing to exhibit at this year's Worldcon, Buconeer.

"Help-Plants," by **David Riley**, may make you wonder the next time you dig into a side dish of broccoli.

David makes a living in the British aerospace industry. He made his first professional sale in 1970 to the *11th Pan Book of Horror Stories*.

His wife Linden runs her own catering business.

David is an avid collector of books and videos, has visited Turkey, and hates "pretentious claptrap and left-wing politicians."

His story is illustrated by **Clyde Duensing III**, who has done a number of illustrations for *Aboriginal* and combined his talents with Carl Lundgren for the cover of issue 39-40. □



Clyde Duensing III



Algorithms and Nasal Structures

By Lois H. Gresh

Art by Larry Blamire

Amy's fingertips slipped to her computer pad, gently caressed velvet, adhered. On the backs of her eyelids, bit-blazed as if to a movie screen, was the most relaxing scene she could conjure. Tufts of soft grass rippled. A white picket fence stretched to a sunny horizon off-lid. Warmth dripped behind her eyes.

If only Amy could force the sheep to bounce 82.354 degrees to the right, then -1.43 degrees to the left, then down down, ever so gracefully into the verdant meadow. Then she could count sheep and fall asleep, and for a few hours, her eyes wouldn't burn and the back of her head wouldn't throb.

To pass Professor Shmutz's Algorithms and Nasal Structures, Amy had to force perfect sheep over the fence. For the A required of graduate students, her software must spray smell into Shmutz's nose, and when he ran her program against malodorous sheep files, he had to choke from the stench of wet fur.

Stress clenched the back of Amy's head. She would fail, she just knew it.

The phone icon flashed red on the control pad over her desk. Amy ignored it. Probably Mr. Soing, calling to badger her about his restaurant accounts. Was she sure about the depreciation of the flipflopkin' pressurized pancake flinger? Was she sure about that overhead cost, seemed awfully high? Soing was lost forever in the Manual Ages. Heaven help her if he ever learned about accounting software. Balancing his books provided most of her income.

But she wouldn't be strapped for funds and desperate for A's if Frank hadn't dumped her for that Alaskan dental hygienist. Splayed across a dental chair probing a frizzy-haired tart-eyed slut while their three-year-old son suffered from croup ... like Jasper's attack last night that required four hours in the emergency room.

Sheep dangled before her eyes. The white fence peeled to splintered gray. She had failed Frank: she hadn't been woman enough, hadn't given him what he needed.

Amy sniffled, then forced herself back to the reality of virtual sheep, all stacked and ready for popping. Because she'd written the program in the emergency room during Jasper's croup attack, she'd had no time to test the nasal pointers for Shmutz's God-awful-critical odors.

The first two lambs boinged from the stack and

over the fence. Both had goofy faces and shredded legs. Amy tried to shift the image in her mind and project a sheep with whole legs.

But she had no control. Shredded sheep flailed over the fence and flopped into a huge heap. Vainly they struggled to their feet and tried to leap back over the fence.

Amy's brain pushed tight against her skull. She hadn't tested the sheep for speed. The program was due tomorrow night. If her grades slipped below 3.95, she would never find a real job.

The phone icon flared again, this time brighter, more urgent. Who would be calling this late at night? Amy punched a phone button, screamed "What?" into the speaker.

"I'm comin' home, babe."

The voice was familiar. Dark and cold, swelled from a pit.

Frank?!

Rancid meat socked her nose. Had the circuits shorted and fried the lambs? Maybe luck was with her and the nasal pointers were working. Amy scrolled the code: indirect pointers, amplified by arrays, sprayed into her nose's sensory cells. There was a distinct smell here. Maybe Shmutz would be so impressed he'd let her into Scent Symphonies, where she would code smelly sonatas for pitbulls and moody cats, very useful in today's job market.

"Well, don't say too much now, babe. Plenty of time to catch up tomorrow. I know you're probably wondering why I'm coming home, but you know, Amy, I got to missing you and Casper."

"Our son's name is Jasper, Frank, it's Jasper."

Amy blinked. Jasper's face was inches from hers. Fat cheeks. Honey eyes. "Mama, get off the pad. I want water. Please." He bobbed his shoulders; it was his way of being cute.

"I have some cash that I made up north. I wanna take care of things, Amy."

"Who's that, Mama?"

"Oh, nobody. Just Frank, the Eskimo from hell."

"Amy, I know I've been up north for a long time, but I'm here now for you and Casper. You're all I ever wanted, Amy. So ... I'll see you early tomorrow, okay?" The phone icon blinked red, then off.

Amy saw red on the walls, on her son's face. Frank had left six months ago, angry because he

had lost his job, angry because she needed to work, angry about everything and everyone. And now he was back. Was he a husband returning, or just some guy wanting a temporary free ride?

Jasper's honey eyes thickened. "That was Daddy."

Amy snuggled into his hair. It smelled of baby shampoo. Much better than wet sheep fur. "I know, Jasp, that was ..." but she couldn't bring herself to say Daddy because she couldn't bear to think that her Jasper had anything in common with something as foul as Frank Laroofoe.

Although Amy really didn't want to put away her computer pad, she tucked it into the top desk drawer under a logic prober. Like it or not, that was her life: croup, baby shampoo, and the occasional twisted circuit.

Jasper displayed dimples and gave her enough hugs (one would have been enough) to make her misery worthwhile. She gave him water and tucked him into bed.

Then she stuffed the self-pity into a hole and worked all night.

By three a.m., randomly generated sheep leapt like ballerinas over a pearly white fence. Perhaps with excellent editing but minimal nasal, Shmutz would give her an A minus and she could continue her studies and get a job coding smell and taste into Aunt Koo Phung Potato ads. She might even land a high-paying spot coding touch into porno flicks. Then she and Jasper would build a fancy Tinkerhouse from one of those new snap-together kits.

Damn him, what did Frank want after all this time? She didn't know what she'd do when she saw him.

Maybe she'd kill him.

She chunked in some old code of a Fibonacci bit spray, and an impressionist portrait of nodding daisies swept to her eyelids. Shmutz's test file opened easily and regurgitated a sheep in small chunks. Shmutz was up to his tricks again, trying to "separate the men from the boys," as he liked to say. The sheep chunks wouldn't fit into the mandatory hardcoded sheepstruct or leap through the lambloop. She exploded the chunks and deleted the Shmutz-supplied tail tentacles and bobbing bladder balls.

This time, she would give Frank so much love that he'd never leave. Maybe he wouldn't whine when she worked all night. Maybe he'd help with Jasper. And maybe this time she'd be good enough for him.

Or, maybe, just maybe, she would kill him.

Shmutz's second test sheep had a nosebleed that bled red all over the white fence. Amy coded a quick fix to plug dripping nostrils. The third sheep had ticks (very hard to find), black chipped teeth, and disgusting breath. It was already six in the

morning. Amy tackled sheep number four with its six snouts and poodle hairdo.

Who cared, really, what Frank wanted? He'd left her for that ice maiden, let him go back to his igloo. The old humiliation welled into a pain fog. Her fingers slipped from the computer pad. Frank had been so happy with his life, so proud as an internet cop. Then Rolando Pie had won the lawsuit that finally forced the government to release ancient encryption codes. Security systems had proliferated, become hackproof. Net copping had become a lost profession, Frank a lost man.

Amy cried until she despised herself, then forced herself back to work. By the time Jasper awakened, her program parsed and edited sheep perfectly. The indirect pointers, amplified by arrays, sprayed strong sheep odors into her nasal cells. It was almost fun to shoot ions across cell membranes and fire frequency-coded impulses into her nose's sensory nerves.

She rode the subway to nursery school with Jasper. He asked endless questions — How do the wheels turn? Do you love me, Mama? — and Amy mumbled, "Uh huh" over and over, wondering if Jasper would become a lost man like his father.

She walked the five miles to Soing's restaurant. Barely noticed the landmarks: shuttered buildings pocked by despair, shuttered eyes of old drunks, faces as worn and pocked as the buildings that propped their backs. Her eyes burned. Everywhere the haze of hot, gray air, like walking through static. She dropped off Soing's monthly accounting statements. As usual, he refused to pay her, this time because he wasn't sure she had tallied the depreciations correctly.

Vaguely, she was aware that she wasn't arguing with him, that she wasn't despising him for his luxury life. She wasn't wishing, as usual, that her hands would rise to his shriveled sweaty throat and push, push until thumb met bone and the little chicken neck would break. She could hear it — snap snap ping!

But as it was, she just bobbed her head and sighed, for she knew that there was no work in town and she was lucky to have Soing. She left for the long walk home. Like a field of nodding daisies, drunken heads nodded everywhere: from benches, storefronts, garbage-choked curbs.

Amy pressed her fingers to the apartment lockpad, and the latch clicked, the door swung open. Inside, street glare shimmied up the walls and spiked the ceiling. Fuzzy neon caterpillars slinked to end tables, were squelched by shadow.

And from the shadow, something large loomed. It laughed. It pressed the wall console. Overhead lights streamed white.

Amy screamed.

Wrinkle masses writhed in the blotches under his eyes, eyes that penetrated both clothes and

soul in one fast sweep. Filthy fingers clutched her computer pad. "Still up to your old tricks, eh, babe? Programs, programs, programs. You always were the busy little wife, tap tap tapping on this damn pad while I worked my butt off, cleaning sewers, draining sludge, anything to earn a buck."

Amy steeled herself. This was the man she had loved. He would never physically hurt her. He was a blowhard, a pussycat under macho veneer. Had she been a better wife when Rolando Pie destroyed him, maybe Frank wouldn't be so bitter. Besides, in Frank's grimy paw was the key to her life, the computer pad that contained the smelly sheep. "Give me the pad, Frank. You're holding a lifetime of nasal research."

He whipped the pad behind his back. "Don't need it anymore, Amy babe. I made lots of money. Aren't you going to ask how?"

Dental hygienist, black heart beating under white uniform. Unemployed netcop, heart frittering under ditchdigger's dungarees. She eyed the computer pad. She felt sorry for him, sorry for herself. "Okay, Frank, tell me how you earned all this money."

"Outposts in the Arctic, Amy. Yeah, I went to Siberia, just for you and Casper. They have big research facilities there. I spent months digging permafrost with chain gangs. Nobody else to do it. They paid me a fortune."

Hope glimmered somewhere in the knot that clenched her chest. Jasper's father was back, he talked like the old blowhard Frank. "What about the dental slut, Frank?"

He swept away the slut with a fling of his hand. The computer pad with the perfect sheep code crashed against the wall.

Amy lunged at him, slapped the blotched cheeks until her palms stung. That was it, she would kill him! He grasped her wrists in one fist and forced her to the desk chair. She thrust her teeth into his arm. He leapt back, released her. "God, Amy, what'd I do to deserve that?"

"My program, Frank, my life ... Shmutz ... it's not Casper, it's Jasper ..."

The pad was a fuzzy dead animal heaped by the wall. Frank plucked it up and offered it to her. "I didn't mean to break it, Amy, honest. I want to be with you and the boy, the way things used to be. If you would just stop hammering on the computer pad, just stop and be content." The eyes pulled at her clothes again, tugged at her soul.

You and the boy, you and the boy. The way things used to be. It was too much, just too damn much. She sent Frank on his way, told him she'd think about it.

Then she collapsed into bed with the pad, caressed it, tried to conjure images. Perhaps, given time, she could fix it.

But she couldn't fix the code, and by the time

she hauled off to the subway to retrieve Jasper, she'd tried everything: adaptive neuron filters that responded to changing odors, cognitive formulations that interpolated solutions and required minimal testing. She had emailed Shmutz for an extension. Shmutz had given her until noon tomorrow, and regardless of her results, he would reduce her grade by five points. She would need a nearly perfect score to continue her studies.

That night, Frank helped Jasper with his math homework. "A tangent is opposite over adjacent, Jasp. Then you flip it and get cotangent." Amy peeked from the bedroom and saw her two men in harsh white light. Frank's thick filthy fingers gentle in Jasper's honey sweet hair. Jasper's eyes wide, drenched in adoration for this man, this internet cop who'd saved countless bucks for the government but who couldn't seem to save himself.

She lost herself in work, breaking only to tuck Jasper into bed and see Frank off. "See you tomorrow, Amy, you and the boy. I told you this would work out. Just quit with the coding, and maybe everything will be all right this time." He squeezed her hand. It terrified her that anyone could have such thick, wide nails.

At midnight, the phone icon flashed red and she ignored it. Then again at two a.m., and again at four. She ignored the urgent flashes and concentrated on Shmutz's program.

She played with the air streams floating over the sensory cells in her nasal conch. She slowed the timing of the loop that controlled air flow to a near halt. With a bottle of perfume under her nose, she ran the sheep program. Only a tiny eddy of scent reached her inner nose. She slowed the loop some more, ran the code again, and this time, her sensory cells remained clear of perfume.

Then she quadrupled the indirect pointers spawned to each sensory cell, and she enlarged the olfactory arrays that stimulated nerve endings belonging to the first brain nerve.

Knowing the high sensitivity of nerve endings to strong scents, Amy plunged her nose into the perfume bottle and ran the code. Shmutz's sheep leapt gracefully over the fence and off the bit screen of her eyes. There was no perfume smell. The filthy fur reeked with a sourness that turned her stomach. Shmutz would vomit. She would earn her A.

She felt so good she decided to give Shmutz a little bonus. A quick switch on the command image (sheep -p) would allow Shmutz to smell perfumed fur, an option he'd probably appreciate after running his malodorous sheep test files. She snatched benzenes from departmental libraries and hard-coded her pointers and arrays to amplify the perfume.

Frank showed up early and offered to take Jasper to nursery school so Amy could get some

sleep and then turn her program in to Shmutz. He was trying so hard.

"Did you call last night?"

He nodded, almost ashamed. "You can code if you want, Amy, just let me come back. There's nowhere else I belong."

So Frank had called her desperately all night while she worked. Maybe he had finally realized that programming was their financial security. Besides, if he left again, she would still have the code, and if he stayed, she could give the big kiss-off to Mr. Soing.

She slept, and when Frank returned from the subway, she remembered all the hollow men slumped by hollow buildings, lost men with shuttered eyes. Frank's eyes glowed with the need to move on and recover life. His slump was over.

Amy reached for the perfume bottle on the desk. She waved it under Frank's nose and flirtatiously dabbed perfume on her neck and down her shirt. "Smells like oil rigs in here," he said, "sexy oil rigs." She wanted to tell him it was a light touch of benzene, as if he cared, but he was too eager for flipfloppin' and pressurized flinging.

And then they lay on cool sheets and stared at the ceiling, where jutting brown stains clung like dead phallic symbols. Frank said: "They look like chains up there, huh, Amy? Long, long chains that never end."

She closed her eyes and pretended the perfume was daisies.

He said, "I really didn't earn much on the Siberian gig, but I'll find something. After all, it's not like I haven't dug ditches or cleaned plates before."

It didn't matter. Amy understood Frank's insecurities. And any income would cool her desire to murder Mr. Soing. She leaned across the sheets and grabbed the computer pad from the desk. "Run the sheep program, Frank. I think it's a winner. See if it puts you to sleep. Think of the word, sheep. That's all you have to do."

Frank hesitated. He'd never been comfortable with what he called her computer gizmos. But then he poked the wire into his nose, slipped his fingers to the pad, and shut his eyes.

Her heart swelled, ready for Frank's reaction.

It was instant.

His body convulsed. He gasped for breath. Eyes rolled in their sockets, black frothed from swollen lips. Under his eyes, the wrinkle masses were bright red, pulsing with the urgency of a phone icon.

Amy smacked his hand from the computer pad. She slammed her own at phone buttons. A shrieking of livecop sirens. Screech of wheels out front. What would this do to Frank, to be saved by livecops, the men who had outmachoed him for the few jobs open to terminated netcops?

They slapped an oxygen mask to his face, rolled him to a stretcher, then checked his pulse as they carried him from the apartment.

"Who was he? How did this happen?" someone asked. It was a man, taller than Frank, with more muscles, more hardness to his eyes.

She must have messed up the switch, coding the sheep -p for a normal malodorous run and the plain sheep command for the perfumed run. Had she tested the -p option, she would have known that it triggered far too much benzene into the nose. How could she have been so sloppy? If Shmutz had taught Amy anything, it was to test her algorithms and nasal structures.

She could just picture Frank's enlarged olfactory arrays stimulating the oversensitive nerve endings of his first brain nerve. The benzene-laced perfume of wildflowers seeping in from the hard-coded bit sprays, drenching his nerve endings with deadly amounts of scent.

Had she killed him?

The livecop wouldn't understand, he wouldn't appreciate her need to be with Frank. Very simply she said: "He was Frank LaRoofe."

The livecop looked at her, puzzled. Metal cuffs clanged against the steel bat dangling at his side. "You'll have to give me a little more than that, miss."

If Frank were lucky, he'd somehow avoid a heart attack or paralysis. Frank would make it, he would not be a lost man. She would not be his killer, because Jasper did not need a lost mother. "Frank is the father of my son. I guess you could say he's my husband."

"Okay, Mrs. LaRoofe, do you have any idea what happened?"

"We were, you know ... damn, can't you make this easier on me? We were rekindling old passions, okay? Frank has some sort of heart condition. He's been working in the Arctic, digging permafrost, killing himself to earn money for us. He's a good man. He was a netcop."

She knew that would do the trick. Livecops and netcops were brothers. The man backed off, actually tried to comfort her, offered to help.

Then she found herself alone in the apartment. Fuzzy neon caterpillars slinked to end tables. And from the shadows, something large loomed. It laughed.

It was Frank. Poor Frank, who was willing to dig ditches and wash dishes for her. Frank, who had lost the meaning of life and desperately needed her to find it for him.

And talk about a serious software bug ...

A few weeks later, Amy caught Frank fondling a nurse. At first she was upset, but then her report card came with an A in Algorithms and Nasal Structures; and somehow Frank just didn't matter anymore. □

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Correspondents

By Ben Jeapes

Art by Cortney Skinner

He was going to be late. He had come so far and he was going to be late ... As the correspondent entered the city, he began instinctively to compile his report. He scanned the streets and the crowds, taking in the dirt and the smell and the squalor. He recorded the contrast between the magnificent stone churches and colleges and the ramshackle common buildings; he noted the great, blank walls that so cleanly divided Oxford between town and gown, with the profane real world on one side and the sacred world of scholarship on the other. The jumble of ideas and themes would all be sorted out in his report, when he had a moment.

He really ought to be getting on. A thought called up a street map of Oxford in the sixteenth century, and he saw that he was almost there.

He was, indeed, too late, at least for the preliminaries. St Mary's church, where the trial had been held, loomed up ahead, and a crowd was coming out of it. Some people looked at the correspondent, but then they looked away again without curiosity; Oxford was big enough for strangers to be unremarkable, and who would pass up this chance for free entertainment? The correspondent was unnoticed as he followed with the crowd after the centre of attraction — Thomas Cranmer, former Archbishop of Canterbury, due to be burnt at the stake for his Protestantism. It was March 21, 1556.

The crowd reached the city wall where the pile was waiting for Cranmer, who had resigned himself to his fate. He stood placidly in the middle of a crowd of angry, gesticulating men, each one presenting his own view of why Cranmer should recant, even at this last minute. The correspondent continued his report.

"Cranmer is surrounded by worthies talking to him, hoping for a final recantation that will spare him the flames. The mayor is on the verge of tears. The man in scholarly robes and cap on the right must be the bachelor of divinity that the records call Elye, and he is looking more and more put out by Cranmer's stubbornness. The two friars with him also appear to be losing their patience rapidly. I will try to hear their exact words ..."

The Archbishop began to undress, eventually to stand in just a shirt. He was trussed up to the stake, and a cry went up from the crowd as the torch was applied. The correspondent applied his

skills to the pile; a measuring rule appeared in his vision against it, and he saw that it was twenty feet across at the base and ten feet high. It must have been well-oiled, as it caught quickly, though putting out more smoke than flame. The correspondent stood, an island of calm detachment in the seething crowd, recording Cranmer's last act of defiance as the flames rose:

"He has managed to work a hand free and has thrust it into the fire ... he has for the last time renounced his former recantation, which resulted in his watching his colleagues Ridley and Latimer go to the stake, and declared that this hand that wrote it shall be the first part of him to be burnt ... his face shows the pain, yet he has made no further noise."

He looked around him to gauge the crowd's reactions. Some were openly weeping, whether for a lost friend or for a soul consigned to their Hell he had no idea, but he recorded it anyway.

Others were less upset.

"Good riddance!" a voice yelled; a chorus of cheers showed that at least some of the crowd agreed. The correspondent looked over at the speaker, who was himself looking around, apparently pleased by the reaction to his words.

"The heretic had it coming!" he shouted, to more cheers. "God bless the Queen, dragging this country of ours back to the true faith, never mind that German monk's ramblings ..."

The correspondent was struck by the sheer tide of emotion around him, the currents of hate and anger that buffeted him. As he looked away he inadvertently caught the eye of a man standing by him. He had a feeling the man had been looking at him.

"An oaf," the man said, quietly. He was well-dressed and sported a neatly trimmed beard. The skin around his eyes was crinkled, which gave him a friendly and trustworthy look; the eyes themselves also seemed friendly, but every now and then flashed with a hardness that indicated he maybe did not concur with everything the other man was saying.

"His name is Morris," the man continued in the same quiet, conversational way. "He is not entirely uneducated; he studied for the priesthood and failed. Do his words disturb you, friend?"

"There was a trial and Cranmer was judged



guilty," said the correspondent, his first words spoken out loud since arriving in this time. "His fate is no more than the law."

The man laughed. "Ah, you give a safe reply! Friend, do I detect that you have travelled far to be here?"

"I have this day arrived in Oxford," the correspondent said. "I am come from —" (From where? Where would be a good place?)

To his surprise the man clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"The inns hereabouts will cost you a pretty penny, friend. I invite you to my humble abode. For, as the Greek proverb says —"

— but it was not Greek that the man spoke. The man dropped, instead, into the language of the Home Time. "Welcome to this era, friend."

The correspondent's eyes widened, but he smiled and said, in English:

"I accept your most kind invitation, sir. But first I must finish here."

The pile of wood was allowed to burn its course; the dead Archbishop sagged limply from his stake in the middle, and the stench of burning flesh infiltrated the clean, pungent wood smoke. The correspondent added the detail to the report.

He and his new friend stayed until the crowd began to drift away. Cranmer's charred body was taken down and quickly carried away by a group of people: friends or enemies, the correspondent didn't know. He considered following them, but decided against it. Cranmer was dead, and it was his execution, not his burial, that had had the effect on history.

"You are ready?" the other man said. The correspondent nodded.

"My coach is this way," the man said, leading the correspondent away from the crowd. "The driver is a servant of this time, so until we are alone we must speak only of inconsequentialities."

"Of course," the correspondent agreed.

The coach took them to a well-appointed house, black and white in the manner of the time, in Headington outside Oxford. The house was large enough to have a hall; a large, muscular man lounged here, apparently chatting up a woman. They both jumped to their feet expectantly when the two came in; the correspondent studied them in a glance and decided they must be servants.

"Carry on with your work, Rachel," his new friend said. The woman bustled out through a door. "Wilf is my factotum and a most loyal man to have around. But be about your duties whilst I entertain my friend, Wilf."

"Yes, Mr. Taylor." The man left, but with a curious glance at the visitor.

"As I said, I have servants of this time. Now, in here," the man said, leading the correspondent through to the main room. He sat his guest down and called for beer from the housekeeper. Eventually they were alone.

"We can use the language of the Home Time, if such would make you more comfortable," the man said.

"Please."

"Fine." The man easily slid into his native tongue. He sat and lounged in a chair. "You know, I saw you from a mile off. Oh! We haven't been introduced. My name's Richard Taylor. At least, that's the name I use most of the time."

"I'm ..." The correspondent hadn't thought of what name to adopt. "John Smith?"

Taylor winced. "Terrible. At least call yourself ... Edward. A good name for this time, after the late King, Queen Mary's brother."

"Edward Smith?"

"It will do." Taylor grinned. "Ah, it's good to see someone I can have an intelligent conversation with!"

"How did you spot me?" Edward said.

"Oh, not from anything you were doing. From what you were not doing, Edward. Everyone's face showed something, but you just stood there, taking it all in. And you have the look that we all have. I've seen it before —"

"How?" Edward said, surprised. There was no actual rule against correspondents mixing, so far as he knew, but they were meant to be few and far apart enough not to bump into each other.

"Well, I've been around for a long time, and I know the kind of thing that correspondents go for."

"But aren't you —"

"I was," Taylor said gently. "I've retired." He waved a hand around him to indicate the house and servants, while Edward's mind wrestled with the idea of a retired correspondent. "I'm a merchant of some success. Knowing what the market will do is a major advantage. I'll have to move on eventually, but I'm comfortable for now." He changed the subject. "So, how did you end up as a correspondent?"

"I don't really know," Edward said. He tapped his head. "I only arrived this morning ..."

Taylor nodded, a trifle knowingly. "... and your memory's still a bit jumbled. I understand." They had to play with the memory of a correspondent. They already knew every detail of his career — what articles he would file, whether he would survive or not — but so that he could act as a free agent, they could not let him know. "Five hours down, five hundred years to go ... do you think you'll make it?"

The Home Time could transmit someone as far back as they liked. They would not send the recall

equipment further back than the twenty-first century, where it was just the right side of anachronism. If you were sent further back than that, you walked home.

"I hope so," Edward said. "It shouldn't be too difficult, should it? How long have you been here?"

"Me? Well, just say my first big report was an interview with Alfred the Great."

"That's a long time!"

"You manage," Taylor said with a shrug. "I've lost count of the 'lurgies I've caught. I've had cholera, malaria, the Black Death and —" he grinned — "some unmentionable kinds of pox, but we always recover. No, keep your head low, always cheer for the winning side, and you get along just fine. I'm thinking of taking a ship to America, you know. Head out west, where the white man won't end up for another couple of centuries and staying alive will be a whole lot easier."

"That's a thought," Edward said. "And in the Home Time they'll love to read stories about North America developing."

"Yes, well," Taylor said with another shrug. "That too."

"You don't sound too enthusiastic."

"I've grown fond of being alive, mate!" Taylor laughed. "I can't blame you, your conditioning's still fresh in your mind, but you do remind me of Roger. Roger Woods, your predecessor."

"My predecessor?"

"The one I imagine they sent you to replace. He died yesterday, mugged in a back alley, massive trauma, killed immediately. The damage was too much at one time for his body to cope with." Taylor held up a finger. "Remember that — we're not completely immortal. Anyway, that's how I guessed you would turn up. They were bound to send someone to cover Cranmer's execution — it's just the kind of thing to appeal to them, and Roger covered Latimer and Ridley last year. Point is, he was keen on the job too. He would report on his latest meal if nothing better showed up."

"But not you?" Edward asked.

"After seven centuries, mate, you get independent-minded." Taylor jabbed a finger at him. "Edward, the people who sent us here are the biggest, smuggest, most amoral bunch of hypocrites that the world will ever see! Think about it. What kind of researcher just reads second-hand reports? The best kind goes out there in the field and gets his own hands dirty, but how many correspondents do you think are academics from the Home Time? Oh no, far too dangerous! They send us suckers back, give us blithe assurances about how dandy it will all be with these organic survival machines that we call bodies, see you in the Home Time, chaps, and they sit comfortably in their offices and read our reports. How much

loyalty could you ever feel to a crowd like that?"

Edward sat with his mouth open. This was heresy, this was ...

Taylor checked himself and shrugged.

"At least, that's what I think," he said. "Do you know what the last report I filed was? 'Sod off, you bastards, I'm my own boss now.'" He grinned lazily. "That was in 1473. Now I just hang about, doing a bit of this and that ... sometimes it gets boring, but I'm happy."

Edward explored the back of his mind again, just to remind himself it was there. The black, closed-off bit.

"There's always the Death Sentence," he said uncertainly. The solution for those correspondents who couldn't face the thought of living as long as the twenty-first century: a collection of nonsense words that lurked at the back of the brain, behind several mental guards, impossible to activate by chance, but which would if desired simply switch the brain and body off. Forever.

"There is, but it's not for me," Taylor said flatly. "Listen, Edward, you're welcome to put up here for as long as you like, but not if you're going to start preaching, got that?"

"I wouldn't dream of it!" Edward said hastily. "You're the boss." He thought quickly about the best way of proving his good will towards his host. "Um — tell me about this time."

"This time?" Taylor laughed. "This morning's affair was a good sample of this time. Mary Tudor is determined to bring this country back to the Roman way and will tolerate no opposition. Concepts like 'consensus' have yet to be invented. People will suffer endless agonies, even death, over their right to say their prayers their way. Ordinary, decent folk will happily see their neighbours tortured unspeakably for not using Latin on the right occasions. It's considered that the suffering of the flames at the stake purges you of sin and makes you ready for heaven. Certain kinds of execution are seen as a privilege!"

"And no one stops to ask why?"

"No, of course not! Get it into your head, Edward, that people here don't think like we do. Rational thought counts for nothing, and emotion counts for everything. Love thy neighbour and then slaughter him — that's the locals for you."

"That man at the stake —" Edward said. Taylor laughed.

"Ah, yes, friend Morris! He's a bitter man. He caught the priesthood bug in King Edward's reign, but he was too Roman in his ways and was sent down from his college. The country now follows the Pope again, but they still prefer their priests to be motivated by something more than sheer hatred of Protestants. So, now Morris haunts the town with his cronies, looking out for the smallest sign of heresy. You heard him talk.

He's a bore and a bigot, but I'd love to get him into debate. He should be able to provide some reasons for his beliefs, rather than spout what the priests tell him. But not in these times, I think."

"You wouldn't get very far."

"Indeed."

Edward digested this all. "Thank you. I'll remember that." He wanted to like Richard Taylor, but his conditioning cried out against this man, this renegade correspondent. Maybe he should leave. "Richard, I'm grateful for your help, but I will have to go ..."

Taylor held up a hand. "Of course. But ..." He smiled. "I said I like the company. Can't you just stay a while? A couple of days?"

Edward lay in his bed. His eyes stared blankly towards the ceiling, and though it was dark he could easily see the plaster above him. He had turned all his senses to maximum while he prepared his report — a habit that Taylor had said it would be useful to acquire, should anyone at some future date come by and find the correspondent apparently in a coma.

Images flickered through his mind, and he separated them into two files: one that was his actual report on the execution, and one that would be a discourse on life in the sixteenth century in general, once he had sufficient supplementary data.

Into the former he put the straightforward sensory data of the day. The first thing he had noticed after arriving was the purity of the air he breathed. He had arrived in the countryside; when he had got close to town he had known it, because the wind changed and the air he was breathing had been the air that blew out of Oxford. It was the air of a society where the horse was the main form of transport and the populace believed that baths transmitted disease.

There was more in this vein. Oxford in the rain; the people; the *zeitgeist*. To it he added those things which had impacted on his emotions — the aura of the crowd around the stake; the hatred; the bigotry. The sheer animal unreason of it all.

He valiantly resisted the temptation to include mention of Taylor. Taylor had been good to him and had committed no crime, but still Edward doubted his masters would approve.

When the report was finished, he breathed a sigh. His first! Now it just needed filing. The Moon was up, so —

He thought, and a tone that only he could hear sounded in his head.

"AL/1556, stand by," said a voice. Then, "AL/1556, transmit." He thought again, and in a couple of seconds it was over.

"Report received, AL/1556," said the voice.

His report was filed. A big moment! Perhaps

tomorrow he would celebrate with Taylor. Taylor had gone sour on the correspondents, but he could probably still recall the elation of his own first report and would understand what it meant to Edward.

Edward got out of bed and strolled over to the window to look at the Moon. Somewhere up there was the station, awaiting retrieval by those who had put it there, centuries from now. The thought was comforting. He had no doubt that sooner or later in his career he would feel mighty lonely, and it would be good to know that up there was something else from the far future. A link to the Home Time.

Edward turned back to the bed in preparation for sleep — and then turned toward the window again, for within the last second he had heard voices outside in the street. He would never have detected them without his correspondent's abilities. One was Taylor's.

There was no reason why Taylor should not wish to leave his house late at night — but after supper that night Taylor had gone out of his way to say that he was having an early night in preparation for a busy day tomorrow.

Edward was barely responsible for his actions in slipping out of the house and tailing his host. He was a correspondent.

Taylor was not alone — he was accompanied by Wilf, the man that Edward had seen on first entering Taylor's house that day. For his servant's benefit — on his own he could have managed without, as Edward was doing — Taylor carried a lamp. It did not give much light.

They came within sight of a pub in St. Clements, across the river from the main town, and the two men stopped, waiting in shadow. It was closing time, and the clientele was leaving. A crowd of men came out all together, and at the centre Edward saw the loud-mouthed man from the stake — the failed priest, Morris. Taylor and Wilf followed after him at a safe distance, themselves now acting like men who had just left the pub. Morris and his friends took no notice. One by one Morris's friends peeled off until Morris was on his own.

Morris didn't notice them until it was too late. When they jumped on him he bellowed and lashed out, and if one of his blows had connected it would have hurt, but he had not been trained as Taylor had. Before anyone around had plucked up the courage to investigate the disturbance, the two men and their unconscious captive had vanished into the night.

Edward watched through a crack in the planks of the wall of a barn outside Oxford.

Morris woke up slowly. There was a flickering light from a lantern nearby, surrounded by a red glow from a brazier next to it. Irons stuck out of the glowing coals. He lay on a pile of straw.

He squinted groggily up at the two men who stood over him; Wilf smirked, and Taylor had an expression of mild curiosity. He wriggled; he was stripped naked, and the straw seemed to irritate his back and buttocks.

Then his mind cleared and he lunged up, to find that he was tied down with high-quality hemp.

"What d'you want? Where is this?"

"Where no one will hear you, Morris," Taylor said.

"What do you want?" Morris shouted again.

"You are a good Catholic, are you not, Morris?"

Taylor said. "A loyal subject of the Bishop of Rome?"

"What's it to you?" Morris asked cautiously.

"Are you?"

"I am," Morris said. His voice trembled, and Taylor smiled. The word had not yet been invented for that smile; it made Morris shiver. Perhaps it was then that Morris knew he was dead.

"Good. Wilf, fetch the tools."

Wilf walked over to Morris's left. The captive strained to see what he was doing, but the man was too far behind him.

"You were heard," Taylor said, "at the stake today, expressing approval for the execution of Archbishop Cranmer."

Sweat broke out on Morris's forehead. Edward took in the dilated eyes and the flared nostrils and diagnosed the symptoms of terror.

"D-did I?" Morris said.

"The heretic had it coming. God bless the Queen, dragging this country of ours back to the true faith, never mind that German monk's ramblings," Taylor said. "My memory never fails me."

Wilf walked back into Morris's view, laden down with tools. Taylor took a blacksmith's pliers off him and held them out, looking at them thoughtfully.

"Those were your words," he said. "You condone the burning of heretics."

"Ave Maria, gratia plena, dominus tecum, benedicta tuum ..." Morris had made up his mind that he was about to be a martyr to the faith. Taylor nodded at Wilf.

"Dominus tecum, do what you want with 'em," he said. He handed the pliers back. "Begin."

Morris's gabbling rattle of Latin got faster and higher as the pliers closed around his left big toe, then turned into a scream as Wilf closed the handles and bone crunched.

Wilf released the pliers, and Morris gulped air in huge sobbing breaths while the pain died down to a throb. Then he vomited.

"I'll not recant," Morris vowed as his chest heaved. "I'll not turn to that pagan devil Luther."

"I don't want you to turn to Luther, Morris. I want you to justify your faith to me. Why should Cranmer have been executed?"

"He was a traitor! He renounced the true faith —"

"He wrote a prayer book in the English tongue. Where was the treason in that?"

"It was a blasphemy! It —"

"Why?"

"The Latin tongue is the tongue of the true —"

"Why?"

"I'll not answer your damn questions! Rot in the hell that is waiting for you!"

"Wilf," Taylor said. Wilf came forward with the pliers again. "The other toe."

Edward Smith recorded it all.

At first he had intended to march straight in. Wilf he could handle, and he should be well matched for Taylor as well.

But a voice inside him had said, *watch*.

Then he had seen the torture begin, and the voice inside him had said, *report*. After all, it was only his sense of propriety that was outraged. He felt — could feel — no sympathy for a man of this time.

By chance and by instinct, he was compiling a report in his mind. Provisional title: *Anatomy of a torture session*.

"The subject's faith is firmly lodged in his mind and he will consider no alternatives. He was asked if he believes in Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. He does. He was asked if he believes in loving his enemies, as Jesus commanded. He does. He was asked if he believes that heretics should be tortured and put to death. He does. Asked why, he stated that torture will speed them on their way to heaven. He was asked, does he believe he will go to heaven after this evening? At this point he invariably lapses into Ave Marias or Pater Nosters.

"The man named Wilf applied the pliers to his other big toe and he would only repeat the same points. After that Taylor instructed Wilf to move on to the branding irons. These were applied to his chest, his stomach, and his genitals. Wilf then applied the thumbscrews. It appears that torture instruments should be applied singly: if applied two or more at a time they are less effective, as the subject's concentration is divided between two sources of pain ..."

There was more, much more, and Edward took it all in. He was trembling and sweating: it was like being tied down and made to watch. He want-

ed to feel Morris's pain — he knew that he should, and he despised himself for the great nothingness inside him where, as a human being, his sympathy for Morris should have been.

Yet he could only report. He found himself already planning ahead: he would reopen the file later and flesh it out a bit to turn it into a report for transmission. Who would be interested? Perhaps he should make several versions. A dry, factual one for the historians; a more chatty version for the general readership ...

Eventually Wilf said, "People will soon be about, Mr. Taylor."

Taylor checked his inner clock.

"True," he said. "I doubt we will get any more out of Morris." He looked down at the broken, twisted body, which they had been careful to keep alive. Two tortured, animal eyes stared back up at him.

"You have been a great help, Morris," he said. He shook his head, genuinely baffled. "Amazing. You really do believe it, don't you? And you don't see any contradiction, any conflict ... mad. Quite, quite mad."

He turned to Wilf.

"He will soon be dead. Come, Wilf."

Wilf was already heading for the door. With a calm, smooth motion Taylor pulled out a knife from his cloak and plunged it into Wilf's back, piercing his heart. Wilf arched backwards and cried out, once. Then he toppled over rigidly, like a falling plank. Taylor casually stepped over the body. He stopped when he saw Edward standing in the entrance to the barn.

The correspondent was pale and trembling. His instinct when Taylor called a halt to the session had been to walk back to Oxford, now that the report was over. Walking instead into the barn to confront Taylor had been like walking through treacle.

"Hello, Edward," Taylor said.

"Kill him," Edward said.

"Why?"

"Kill him!"

"You kill him."

Edward paused, then unsteadily walked forward, keeping an eye on Taylor. Taylor's hands were both free, but he might have had another knife hidden away.

Edward stopped by the brazier and studied Morris carefully.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but you wouldn't want to live. Sixteenth-century medicine will never make you whole again." He put a hand to Morris's neck, spreading his fingers out over the throat. Morris whimpered weakly. "I'm sorry," Edward said again, and squeezed. Once Morris was dead, Edward kicked the brazier so that it toppled over and its coals spilled out onto the straw. The fire

caught and spread around the body.

"He is doing you a favour, Morris," Taylor said. "The flames will speed you to heaven." He turned to go. Edward took one last look at Morris and followed. As they left the barn, the flames were climbing up the walls.

They walked for a minute without saying anything. Then Taylor stopped and looked back.

"Quite a sight, isn't it?" Taylor said in the Home Time tongue. Edward carefully positioned himself so that he could see Taylor and the barn. It was burning merrily, and the flickering lit up the countryside all around.

"Why did you do it?" Edward said.

"You don't know what to think, do you, Edward?" Taylor said. "You know you ought to be feeling horror and revulsion towards me, and you want to, but you can't. Your conditioning won't let you. Morris and Wilf were both of this time, you think, so why should their fate bother you?"

"Why did you do it?"

"Why? Curiosity, really. I wanted to see what makes a man like that tick. I don't file reports anymore, but I still have this urge to find things out. I can't help it."

"Wilf?"

"Wilf was just as bad as Morris, but a Protestant. I'd already had a long conversation with him about his faith, and I couldn't hang on to him after tonight, could I? He may not have known the exact word for blackmail, but he would have understood the concept. So, Edward! What are you going to do with the report you've been compiling? Will you be transmitting it? Of course, that will make you seem like an accomplice to the Home Time, especially after killing Morris —"

"The report is over," Edward said, in a voice that was not his own.

"Sorry?"

Edward swung round to look at him.

"The report is over," he said, then, in a more normal but frightened voice, "Richard, there's something inside me —"

Edward was looking out of his own eyes as if his body belonged to someone else. From the back of his mind, the sealed-off bit, something had come forward and taken over. The words that came out of Edward's mouth were not of his own volition. He heard himself say something that was almost, but not quite, the words that triggered the Death Sentence. They did not trigger his —

— they triggered Taylor's. He heard the correspondent gasp, once, and then the man collapsed.

Edward stared down at him for a moment. He knelt to check the vital signs. Taylor was dead.

"What —" Edward murmured.

"His conditioning had broken down," said the stranger in his mind. "Our correspondents must

move unnoticed among the natives, but he took a delight in causing them pain and using them for his own ends. We were aware from correspondent TW/1329, Roger Woods, that an aberrant correspondent was operating in the sixteenth century. We suspect Taylor killed him."

"He killed a correspondent?"

"He reverted to type."

"But ... but —"

"We needed to gather evidence against Taylor, Correspondent AL/1556. No charges are held against you, and your report will make most interesting reading."

"But ... if you wanted the report anyway ..." Edward said helplessly.

"It is unimportant."

"But am I really a correspondent? Or am I just a machine —"

"You are a correspondent who was needed for this one mission. I shall now erase myself, and you will be a free agent again."

The thing was there for a second longer, then was gone, its mission fulfilled. Edward wondered how many other programs he had lodged in the back of his mind.

He began to walk back towards Oxford, his mind already busy polishing up his report.

Reverted to type?

He could not put Taylor out of his mind. Things were whirling about in his mind and falling into place — a whole series of deductions from a small amount of data.

Reverted to type. Taylor's conditioning broke down and he reverted to type. What kind of man had Taylor been in the Home Time? The same as he was here?

What would be the punishment for similar activity in the Home Time? A brain wipe? A life sentence?

(Several life sentences ... ?)

Was this how they got correspondents to volunteer? Edward stopped in his tracks at the thought. Were they all like Taylor, given the chance to redeem themselves by going into the past and living several lifetimes over — or not — to make it back home again?

What kind of a man had he, Edward Smith, been in the Home Time? Was this why his memory was so fuzzy?

He forced these thoughts to the back of his mind. He was a correspondent first and foremost. He knew his duty and it lay with his masters, centuries hence.

Taylor's conditioning had taken seven centuries to crack, and Edward only had five centuries to go until he could transfer back. He could last that long.

Surely ...



Editor's Notes

By Charles C. Ryan

If all has gone according to plan, this issue of *Aboriginal* should have a glossy cover again ... and some interior color illustrations. Next issue, we hope to have even more color.

Yes, we've changed printers again. This time for some improvements. We hope to keep making improvements to the magazine as we rebuild its circulation.

Toward that end, we are hiring a management company to run the business side of the magazine — DNA Publications.

DNA will take over business operations with the Fall 1998 issue. We hope the transition will be seamless. Beginning with the Fall issue, all subscription and change of address information will go to DNA, rather than here.

Likewise, DNA will handle all of the renewal operations, so this is the last issue you can send renewals to our postal box. We will continue to produce the editorial material.

DNA has experience publishing *Absolute Magnitude* and *Dreams of Decadence*, and recently took over the business operations of *Weird Tales*.

One of the biggest problems small press magazines have is getting advertising. It is our belief that having these four publications under one operation will provide strength, enough strength to obtain advertising.

While *Aboriginal* is owned by The 2nd Renaissance Foundation, Inc., a not for profit 501 (C) (3) organization, that does not automatically put money in the till to pay writers, artists, printers, shippers, and the Postal Service — all of whom must be paid to keep issues coming out on a regular basis.

Subscriptions alone don't really do it. If you make the subscription and renewal price high enough to pay for all the operations, fewer people subscribe or renew, because they can get publications that have advertising content at a cheaper price. In publications with 20 to 50 percent advertising, the ads subsidize the cost of the subscription. Though I suspect most of our readers don't want to know all that, any more than they want to know how their sausages or Jell-o are actually made.

This joint operation will also allow each of the participating magazines to save money in mailings to gather new subscribers, which will make all of them healthier.

Wish us well in this venture.



In Defense of Emmerich and Devlin



Yeah, okay, so it's summer, and you know what that means: big bucks in the budget; long lines at the box office; and critics take the hindmost. I've long since stopped despairing over the shallowness of the summer releases; it's just economics — studios couldn't run gambles like *L.A. Confidential* if they didn't have some beefed-up adrenaline-thon paying for the execs' swimming pools and private jets during the dog days (I only wish they'd gamble a little bit more in the cooler months). Nowadays all I ask is not to have my intelligence too grievously insulted and every now and then to see some glimmer of creativity. This year, the odds may be better than others. To wit ...

Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin — those guys who perpetrated *Independence Day* (Emmerich directing, Devlin producing, both writing) — have now come up with *Godzilla* for TriStar (or maybe Columbia, given the recent merging of these two production companies). I know the names of these guys are anathema to many SF fans, and I suppose nothing can excuse how they play fast and loose with science (Mac-compatible alien spaceships) and reality in general (the strangely localized tectonic shift that managed to nudge the Empire State Building into the middle of Fifth Avenue before the beginning of *ID4*). Still, I can't help looking forward to this Americanized version of Japan's classic city-stomper. *Stargate* and *ID4* may have been programmers, but they were *fun* programmers — it was clear Devlin and



Godzilla ...the original Big Foot

Emmerich were having a hoot creating them and were not reluctant to share their high spirits with the audience. That's an unusually expansive impulse in so cynical and greedy an industry — it should be treasured whenever it crops up. Given a giant, fire-breathing reptile to play with (and a budget that, for the first time in a Devlin/Emmerich production, easily jumps the \$100 million barrier), I suspect these two will give us a better than decent ride.

It appears they've got more than enough material to work with: born this time as the aftermath of French nuclear testing, *Godzilla* will be given a sleeker, more anatomically sensible look (although apparently still with human-like knees), and will be allowed to go on a continent-spanning rampage in the U.S. before winding up in New York City to kick some asphalt butt and lay some sequel-worthy eggs. Yup, you heard right: *Godzilla*'s embraced family values. If

Michael Jackson can have 'em, anybody can.

More heresy: I can't honestly say I feel as enthusiastic about *The X-Files: Fight the Future*. Yes, I'm a fan of the show. Yes, I've been following the "mythos" since season one. Problem is: I liked the show a lot more before producer Chris Carter started taking his P.R. so seriously. What many people fail to realize is that *The X-Files* was originally a *joke*; the reason the mythos seemed so impenetrable was because it was never supposed to make sense. Alien changelings, shape-shifting as-sassins, government conspiracies, killer bees — these were so many random riffs off pop-culture paranoia, stitched together episode by episode. Carter's original genius was to pretend there was a larger pattern to be found, if only we knew enough details.

It was his genius, and his course. It's more than likely that, given the history of such prede-

cessors as *Kolchak the Night Stalker* and *Twin Peaks*, Carter fully expected his creation to last no longer than two seasons — enough time to build a cult following without actually having to provide any rational explanations. Well, here it is, five years later, and the strain is showing: the show is deadly serious — glum, even — lacking much of the deadpan wit that in the first seasons made such dire goings-on so watchable (and making the latest season look like Carter's other exercise in ill-advised morbidity, *Millennium*). Meanwhile, the stars are letting their egos do the walking, none more so than David Duchovny, who by dint of his influence is forcing the show to abandon its superb production base in Vancouver for a more Tea Leoni-convenient one in L.A. (a demand that no doubt prompted the recent letter from the Cigarette Smoking Man in Canada and the introduction of a ready-for-action Chris Owens as Agent Spooky ... 'scuse me ... Agent Jeffrey Spender. If these aren't shots across the bow for a certain recalcitrant actor who apparently doesn't recall the fate



Deep Impact

of David Caruso, I've never heard of 'em).

What's the movie about? Sorry, the truth ain't out there ... yet. All the usual suspects will appear, save Nicholas Lea's weasel-boy Krycek (scheduling conflicts). Also in the cast are Blythe Danner, Armin Mueller-Stahl, and (reason enough to wait in line) Martin Landau. It all has something to do with yet *another* mysterious organization, called The Elders, and will offer Sculley being spirited away by faux paramedics right under Mulder's nose, and Mulder running in the streets. And there may be killer bees, shape-shifting assassins, and for all I know, metallic cockroaches bedding down beautiful entomologists named Bambi. Or maybe not. I'm not sure I care anymore. Honestly, there are more important questions to ponder.

Like whether Disney can recover from the perceived failure of *Hercules* with this year's animated release, *Mulan*, and what exactly does it mean when your *failures* wind up making a gazillion dollars internationally? The first feature to be produced completely out of Disney's Orlando animation facility, *Mulan* is based on the Chinese legend of a young woman who assumes her father's place in the war against the Mongols. Of course, I doubt Chinese legend had anything to say about why a particular army captain might have the voice of Donny Osmond; or why a ghostly ancestor would sound exactly like Mr. Sulu

(George Takei); or whether an ambitious recruit could regularly count on receiving pointers from a diminutive, wisecracking dragon whose voice bore an uncanny resemblance to Eddie Murphy's (can't stay away from them cross-dressers, eh, Eddie?).

Yes, Disney is toying with mythology again, something that gets my nose out of joint far less than it does other observers' — I mean, what're you expecting from a genre where people periodically set aside their activities to break into song? What Disney might have to worry about more is that, by dipping into Asian legend, they are once again courting the wrath of *anime* fans who felt *The Lion King* borrowed too heavily from Osamu Tezuka's *Jungle Taitei* (a.k.a. *Kimba the White Lion*). However, none of those fans appeared to be in the audience of invited press who, while told they'd be attending a preview of clips from upcoming Disney films, instead found themselves presented with a rough cut of the full animated feature. Word is the attending throng went wild over the still-incomplete footage. Since then, what little material the company has placed before the public *does* suggest that Disney may be getting back to its *Lion King* strengths — this might be a case where you won't want to wait for the inevitable video release.

The digital deluge begins this summer with the release of Dreamworks' *Small Soldiers*, a fantasy that does the *Toy Story* thing in its depiction of a war



The new Avengers



Will Mulan make up for Hercules?

between computer-generated action figures against a backdrop of live-action humans (Kirsten Dunst, Phil Hartman, and Ann Magnuson form the cast of the latter; Tommy Lee Jones, Denis Leary, and the ol' EMH himself, Robert Picardo, voice the former). On the plus side, the film marks the big screen return of director Joe Dante, a man who gets too few chances to exercise his talents (and, yes, Dick Miller is a member of the live-action cast). On the minus, rumors have it that the story line is far from coherent, and there's an uneasy whiff of me-tooism in this project that isn't helped by Dreamworks' next CG effort, *Antz*, which will be beaten to the screen by Disney's sound-alike *A Bug's Life*.

Nutty Professor or *Golden Child*? *Doctor Doolittle* may once and for all determine the direction of Eddie Murphy's career. We're back to the appealingly humanistic Eddie in this fantasy, with the classic British tale considerably revamped to the star's personality. No pushmi-pullyus or giant sea-snails this time around (and no film-company-busting budget, either) — instead Eddie plays an earnest young doctor who finds himself tempted by an evil insurance company (HMOs: the new film menace) and perplexed by a recently rediscovered ability to grunt and

squeak and squawk with the animals. The beasts talk back with the voices of, amongst others, Norm MacDonald, Chris Rock, and Paul Reubens. Under the direction of the talented Betty Thomas and with animatronic animals by the Henson Creature Shop, the odds are looking good for this one — a hope only encouraged by reports of test screenings where the projectors had to be shut down because audience members were laughing too hard.

Armageddon — that other big-asteroid movie — might be another story. Now, let's see ... Bruce Willis starring in yet another big-budget SF production, this time out of the Jerry Bruckheimer action mill. Good luck with *Breakfast of Cham-*

pions, Bruce — *Armageddon* outa here.

On the one hand, the trailer for *The Avengers*, starring Ralph Fiennes and Uma Thurman as master spies John Steed and Emma Peel, looks pretty cool. And goodness knows, the idea of Thurman in black-leather bondage has certain, uh, anthropological interest (*rouf-rrrrr-rufff-aroooooo!!!*). But Warner Bros. has rescheduled the release date for August 14th — never a good sign — and one has to wonder whether, in these days when camp seems to be the only mode of expression for too many filmmakers, a director such as Jeremiah Chechik (*Benny and Joon*) will be able to finesse the drier tack taken by the original series. Does it provide any sort of a hint that the story line seems to be about an evil plot to control the world's weather, with Sean Connery playing a villain called Sir August de Wynter? How about that that's the same plot used in *Our Man Flint*?

Further down the pike: Warner Bros., the company that hasn't recently had much luck with its tent-pole productions (*Batman and Robin*, *The Postman*), may finally have a winner with *The Wild, Wild West*. Directed by the nimble Barry Sonnenfeld and starring Will Smith as 19th-century super-agent James West, Kevin Kline as chameleonic sidekick Artemus Gordon, and Kenneth Branagh as evil genius Dr. Loveless (ooooool casting!), this looks well placed to replicate the wry humor that made the TV series such a kick. They've even got Robert Conrad — the original West — in a fairly substantial role. Sounds like one to look forward to.

I'm not so sure about *Frost*, a film set to premiere at the end of this year. Also out of Warner Bros., this one has Tom Hanks as a dead jazz musician who's resurrected via CG as Frosty the



Cyber Penny?



Danger, Will Robinson ... danger ...?

Snowman. How dodgy is this set-up? Well, director Sam Raimi ankleed the production when Warner suits decided that they wanted the project to follow the template of *George of the Jungle*. (Come again? Raimi's been replaced by Troy Miller.) If that doesn't get you sweating, consider that this is being produced under the aegis of the Canton Company. As in Mark Canton, the man who brought us *The Cable Guy* and *The Last Action Hero*. Uh-oh.

On the already-released front, *Lost in Space* becomes a chore about forty-five minutes in, 'round about the time that the *Flintstones* factor (that rush one feels in first seeing some bit of Sixties trivia retooled with a mega-budget) fades and the plot is supposed to kick in. There is no plot, by the way — producer/screenwriter Akiva Goldsman, who also committed *Batman Forever* and *Batman and Robin*, doesn't write scripts, he writes *scenes*. He writes enough of them to total 120 pages, then he puts them in a cover and calls it a screenplay. The result is a film that leaps from set-piece to set-piece — a virtual-reality desert, a rampaging robot, a swarm of nasty, metallic spiders — with no modulation in its hectic pace and no sense to its story arc. Director Stephen Hopkins does give the production a luxurious gloss, but has decided on a dark, shadowy mien for the

Jupiter 2 and a wardrobe (by *Batman* costume designer Vin Burnham) that places emphasis on form-fitting rubber and matte-black leather. Given the film's trite family-values theme, the Goth look seems at best weird. On petite Lacey Chabert — whose young-teen Penny has been daubed with heavy eye shadow and slipped into a set of lace-up bondage overalls — it's downright creepy. By the time *Lost in Space 2* rolls around, I fully expect the Space Family Robinson to have broken out the whips and nipple clamps. Lends a new dimension to the phrase, "Oh, the pain, the pain."

On a personal note, I have to say I was more than a little embarrassed by the glowing profile Laurel Lucas gave me in her *Aborigines* column last issue. What makes it doubly embarrassing is that I now have to relinquish this post in order direct my full energies to editing a new animation magazine that will be coming out at the end of the year from the good folk at *Cinefantastique*. I depart with some regret: I've been an AbSF fan and subscriber since the early, hey-look-it's-a-tabloid

days, and plan to keep riffling through the issues long after the first edition of *AnimeFantastique* hits the stands this November. I wanted to express my appreciation to Charles Ryan for giving me this space to vent my impassioned, and sometimes eccentric, point of view, and wish him the best of luck with one of the best SF magazines around. Infinite thanks, Charlie. Next Lunacon, we can both sit down and grouse about the difficulties in getting writers to meet their deadlines. J



A new *Babylon 5* movie

A Very Good Batch

Diaspora

By Greg Egan

Orion, 1997

295 pp., £16.99

Greg Egan usually comes frustratingly close to spectacularly good, but just misses. In *Diaspora*, he doesn't miss.

Diaspora is a major expansion of his Hugo-winning story "Wang's Carpets," but it's done so well that I don't think I would have guessed that it was an expansion.

By the 24th century, most people live as AIs in Polises (virtual com-

and drifting farther and farther from the real world.

The story follows several people who emigrate from their home Polises to Carter-Zimmerman, a Polis which is determined not to withdraw from the real world, but to use the advanced computing power of AI life to speed the understanding of the real universe.

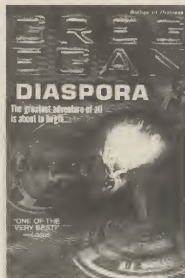
After a very nicely done section detailing the birth and early "childhood" of a new AI, the story switches to C-Z and discussions about the importance of the real world — as hot a political and philosophical topic among the AIs as communism vs. capitalism was to the mid-20th century. While this is going on, a C-Z observatory notices that the orbit of a nearby binary pulsar is decaying anomalously fast, and realizes that they are watching the birth of a gamma-ray burster — which will, incidentally, kill most life on Earth, though it won't affect the Polises.

The resulting destruction ends Fleshers as a branch of humanity, and makes C-Z all the more determined to explore space in the flesh ... well, in person, anyway. The next cataclysm might well destroy the Polises, too, if they are all inward-turned and limited to Earth.

C-Z decides to put its efforts into wormhole technology, and a long, nicely done section of the book details their ultimately futile efforts to create instantaneous bridges to the stars. A particularly creative part of this section is the good job Egan does in making the physics seem plausible. It's all too easy to make up some gobbledygook physics fashioned to the dictates of the plot, but it's much harder to make it seem believable and then to follow its implications faithfully. Egan manages that, and the thread he creates in that theory drives the rest of the book.

C-Z ultimately builds a thousand clones of itself and sends them off —

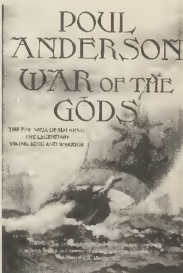
STL — to the stars. ("Wang's Carpets" takes place in this period.) Other clones than the "Wang's Carpets" clones discover additional marvels, and one discovers a planet built with "long neutrons," a perfectly logical plot development. The long neutrons were made by some race long ago, and encode both a warning that the entire Galaxy will blow up in the not-too-distant future as well as a means to escape the destruction, by using the long neutrons as a tunnel into a five-dimensional super universe of which our universe is just a quantum bubble.



munities), with some people still inhabiting the real world as Fleshers, and some as Gleisners: AIs in robot bodies. They are all real people, though most of the people of the Polises are getting solipsistic

Rating System

- ★★★★★ Outstanding
- ★★★★ Very Good
- ★★★ Good
- ★★ Fair
- ★ Poor



C-Z makes the journey, and there is another *remarkably* well done section about living in five dimensions — it's quite a tour de force of alienness.

If you think the wonders stop here, you're wrong. There are a couple of more layers of super-sensawonder, and both are done beautifully. *Diaspora* also has what must be the largest artifact ever described in SF — far larger than the entire universes which have been created

in some stories.

On top of *that*, Egan manages to end the book without everyone dying or becoming terribly unhappy. (The ending isn't precisely *nice*, mind you, but it's not at all as downbeat as is common for Egan.)

I strongly recommend this book. It's superb hard SF, and I think it's the best SF I've read in some time.

Rating: ★★☆☆

War of the Gods

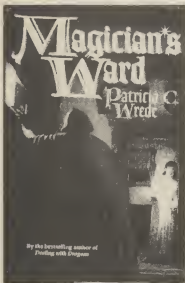
By Poul Anderson

Tor, 1997

304 pp., \$22.95

Poul Anderson is back near the top of his form after a longish excursion into somewhat preachy space fantasy. *The War of the Gods* is prime historical fantasy, similar to his very early *The Broken Sword*, but much more mature.

The main character of *The War of*



the Gods is Hadding, a legendary Danish king akin in many respects to King Arthur, though without a correspondingly large literature. Anderson writes the story of Hadding's life from his fostering by a Jotun after Denmark is invaded and his father killed, to his regaining his kingdom, the wars to sustain it, and his final death as a result of Mordred-like behavior by a daughter.

This is not historical fiction (considering that Odin is a major char-

acter, and Jotuns and Elves play parts), though the history is impeccable.

I particularly like the way Anderson manages to capture the spirit of a very brutish and warlike time without either hopelessly romanticizing it, glorifying violence for its own sake, or making it unrelentingly vicious. The people and their mores *felt* believable.

Rating: ★★☆☆

Magician's Ward

By Patricia C. Wrede

Tor, 1997

288 pp., \$22.95

Magician's Ward is a sequel to *Mairelon*, a wonderfully frivolous story set in a Regency England in which the Royal College of Sorcerers is one of the most respected institutions in the land. In *Mairelon the Magician*, Kim, an orphan girl, is saved and adopted by Mairelon, a powerful sorcerer working undercover. In the sequel, Mairelon is Richard Merrill, not only a powerful and respected magician, but also a younger son in the very rich and aristocratic Merrill family.

Merrill is determined to raise Kim — now his ward — as a proper lady who can take her place in the stuffy Society of Regency England. Kim is happy to be off the streets and likes Richard Merrill a lot, but does not care much at all for the rest of his family.

There's a fairly straightforward problem to be solved, some magic, some Regency stuff, and just the proper resolution to it all. Good fun!

Rating: ★★☆☆ 1/2

Bloodsport

By William R. Burkett, Jr.

Harper Prism, 1998

294 pp., \$5.99

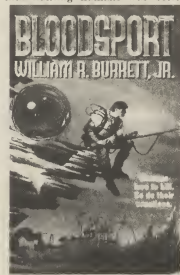
Perhaps 30 years ago Burkett wrote a single book, *Sleeping Planet*, which appeared as a serial in *Astounding* and later as a book. It was an excellent first novel, but we never heard from the author again until now.

Bloodsport isn't the equal of *Sleeping Planet*, but it's a decent book. Burkett has a deep interest in

hunting — he's evidently spent most of his life writing about outdoor sports. It showed in *Sleeping Planet* and is a major factor in *Bloodsport*.

An immensely rich outdoor sports writer shows up on a planet that harbors greer, one of the most dangerous big game species known; hunters and hunted seem to have about a 50/50 exchange rate. He is accompanied by a robotic sphere with near-miraculous powers (too much for the story's sake, I thought) and plunges right into a messy, complicated situation.

It turns out that the greer are intelligent (though non-tool-using) carnivores. A visionary among the greer had seen the arrival of humans on their planet as an opportunity to make a major advance in greer culture. Previously greer males fought among themselves, not for breeding rights among a harem of females, but as a cultural thing. This visionary persuaded the greer that hunting humans was better



sport and ended the hunting of greer by greer, while carefully encouraging humans to set up big-game hunting camps. (The greer refrained from ever attacking humans in hunting camps, but always attacked humans who tried to settle their areas.)

A third force is getting involved, however, and this is probably the biggest flaw in the book. The Galactic Government is messing around and not everyone is who they seem to be and the plot gets a bit out

of hand — I really didn't understand the point of a lot of the government's maneuvering — and, ultimately, it is more complicated than seemed justified.

So, it's a decent story, reasonably written, but trips a bit over its own plot.

Rating: ★★ 1/2

Dinosaur Summer

By Greg Bear

Warner Books, 1998

325 pp., \$23.00

This is a marvelous book, probably properly classed as YA, but who cares?

The premise is lovely: The



Challenger Expeditions to the Lost World brought back dinosaurs and subsequent expeditions brought back more, and by the 1920s dinosaur circuses flourished even though the government of Venezuela had by then cut off access to El Grande.

But by 1947, dinosaurs were old fashioned and considered boring, and only one dinosaur circus was left, and it was ready to close down. The Muir Society had gathered the money to return the last dinosaurs in captivity to El Grande. *Dinosaur Summer* is told by a teenager who goes along on the expedition to return them.

It's not a complicated book with interwoven plots, but a straightforward YA novel. It's profusely illustrated with quite a few black and white drawings and a few color plates. (And it would probably make

a great movie.)

I particularly liked Bear's careful extrapolation based on the Doyle novel. For example, Bear's additions include what we know of the evolution of the dinosaurs, and he takes care to account for an additional 65 million years of evolution.

Recommended. It's a lot of fun.

Rating: ★★ ★★

Foundation and Chaos

By Greg Bear

HarperPrism, 1997

342 pp., \$24.00

This is the second book in the "New Foundation" series, a trilogy of Foundation novels being written by people other than Isaac Asimov. (The first was *Foundation's Fear* by Gregory Benford, and the third will be by David Brin.) Bear has written a good Foundation novel within the constraints of Asimov's universe and follows a reasonable path from Benford's novel.

Foundation and Chaos tells of the events leading up to the start of *Foundation*. It's long after Seldon's First Ministership, well after Dors Venabili left him. There are two crises in *Foundation and Chaos*: some elements of the Imperial government are beginning to suspect that there is a vast robotic conspiracy and are taking steps to eliminate it, and mentalics — proto-Mules — are cropping up and threatening to upset the Foundation apple cart before it's even properly in motion.

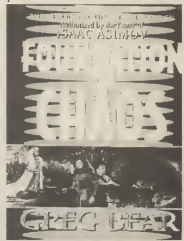
Both plot lines are adequately spun out, though the threats don't seem terribly dangerous. The plot is consistent and plausible, but the various protagonists, unconnected at first, do tend to find each other remarkably easily in a world of half a trillion people.

The third thread Bear sets up is a very interesting one. A robot who has long collaborated with R. Daneel in manipulating humanity in accord with the Zeroth Law of Robotics (in effect, "The end justifies the means") concludes (with a little help from the Voltaire from Benford's book) that this is all hokum and begins to oppose R. Daneel's plans. This brings out of hiding an entire second conspiracy of robots who have resisted R. Daneel's machinations through the millennia.

In Asimov's later Foundation nov-

els, he was coming, I think, to repent of the whole idea of the Second Foundation, a hidden cadre of mental giants who would direct humanity for humanity's own good. The notion of a guiding elite was quite prevalent in the '30s and remained a common theme in SF long after it was recognized in the real world as watered-down Fascism.

In his old age, Asimov turned partly away from it and tried to modify his later Foundation novels to defeat the Second Foundation. He couldn't get away from his ideological roots, though, and came up with the Gaia concept (a racial group mind) — a Second Foundation in which all could participate. Not quite as evil as the old elitist Second



Foundation, but still built on the notion that ordinary people can't be allowed to run their own affairs.

Bear's resolution of this is twofold. First he shows how Hari Seldon's manipulations in quest of the Second Empire destroyed the Renaissance Worlds of Benford's novel, which might have achieved greatness centuries before the First Foundation — but outside the control of psychohistory. Seldon's Plan is more important than the people it supposedly is serving.

Second, he invents the split among the robots, with R. Daneel's party taking the Humanoid position that they are wiser than Mankind and built only to serve and thus can rule and even kill people to achieve their greater ends, while the others oppose them because they still feel themselves subordinate to individual men, not overseers of the entire

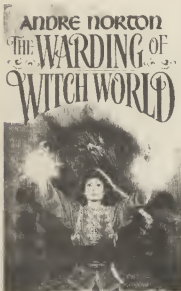
race.

I think Bear has done an *excellent* job exposing the fundamental flaw in the political philosophy of Asimov's original books while still writing a novel to be read and enjoyed.

Bear's novel is at least on a par with the best of Asimov's later Foundation novels. I'm not sure how easy it would be to read and understand if you haven't read the others. Certainly having read them, I enjoyed it a lot.

Rating: ★★☆☆

The Warding of Witch World
By Andre Norton



Warner, 1997
560 pp., \$22.95

The Warding of Witch World should have been subtitled "Old Home Week in Estcarp." The premise is that a magical catastrophe has caused all the remaining Gates (portals into horrors unknown created by the ancient, vanished adepts who made Witch World into the patchwork of monsters and people and magic that it is) to go berserk and pour forth monsters. So all the heroes of all the previous Witch World books gather together to locate and close the remaining Gates.

In the course of doing so, old locales are revisited, old grudges are brought up and sometimes resolved, old friendships are renewed, and an

ultimately good time is had by all. I enjoyed the book, though I think I would have enjoyed it more if I'd read all hundred or so previous Witch World books — many of the characters in this one were clearly important in their own books, but I'd never heard of them.

While Norton did cobble up a sufficient explanation for all the magical debris lying around on Witch World, the patchwork (arbitrary and controlled more by the demands of plot than any internal logic) nature of Witch World becomes apparent. How could any world have more systems of deities (all real and interventionist), more odd races with special powers, more schools of magic, more strange beasts and dangerous monsters, more races of intelligent horses than Witch World?

Ah, well. I still like her earliest novels from the early to late '50s best (and not entirely, I think, because I read them first), though some of the early Witch World books were pretty good. *The Warding of Witch World* is worth reading if you've enjoyed enough of her Witch World books in the past, but for someone coming on it for the first time, it would be a jumble.

Rating: ★★☆☆

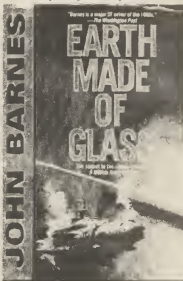
Earth Made of Glass
By John Barnes
Tor, 1998
416 pp., \$25.95

Earth Made of Glass is not at all antiseptic; it's a strong SF novel, a sequel to Barnes's excellent *A Million Open Doors* and set in another pair of marvelously imaginative cultures.

In *A Million Open Doors*, we're introduced to the world about a thousand years hence. In the 24th century, STL ships left Earth to colonize a dozen or so nearby stellar systems. In a last effort to keep all humanity from falling into a single, boring universal culture, many (over a thousand, eventually) colonies were set up with cultures derived from ancient sources or from entirely invented ones. (The two colonies in *A Million Open Doors* were derived from a romanticized version of the troubadour culture of 12th-century Provence and

from an entirely made-up culture which combined Friedman economics, 19th-century British utilitarianism, and fundamentalist Christianity.) This provides Barnes with a most delightful playground in which to write.

About 50 years before these stories, the Springer is invented on Earth, and instantaneous teleportation (limited only by energy and a receiver) brings the stars within reach. Plans for the Springer are radioed to the colonies, and in turn they are connected with Earth and each other. Earth is very interested in seeing that they neither homogenize completely nor wipe each other



out.

In *Earth Made of Glass*, Giraut and Margaret, the two main characters of *A Million Open Doors*, have been working for Earth's secret intelligence agency, helping to peacefully integrate the diverse cultures. They are sent to the last, farthest-out colony to be contacted, Briand, which houses only two cultures that are nearly at war with each other.

One culture is a romantic version of the Maya of ancient Central America, while the other is an extrapolation of what the culture of ancient southern India might have been like when it created its greatest poetry.

Both cultures are very fully realized and, as in *A Million Open Doors*, they are made believable in spite of their magnificent absurdity.

This is no small task! I found myself not only believing that they might have been real, but Barnes's description of their cities made me want to visit them. He manages to make the conflict between them seem plausible and intractable. It's a *fine* job.

Giraut and Margaret are dumped into a very tense, very complicated situation and asked to do what they can. I won't try to explain the details (the book is *beautifully* complicated), but the complexities all work into the story: two cultures at each others' throats, two people whose marriage is shaky, and two beautifully realized cultures, both with admirable and not-so-admirable features. And even the interfering Ambassador isn't cardboard.

I also enjoyed Barnes's ruminations on the nature of a society without want. Technology can give people as much food and as comfortable a life as they want. There is no real overpopulation and there is no war. The scientific advances left to be discovered are difficult, and few people can be scientists. There a thousand years' worth of literature and painting and music at everyone's fingertips. So what do you do with your life?

This is certainly Barnes's best work to date and is, in my opinion, a very strong Hugo contender for next year.

Rating: ★★☆☆ 1/2

Ports of Call
By Jack Vance
Tor, 1998
300 pp., \$24.95

I reviewed Vance's last book, *Night Lamp*, as "quintessential Vance" with a good plot, interesting places, and characters whom one might even like. Well, *Ports of Call* is just like that, but without the plot.

There's not a shred of plot here. None at all. Nothing.

A somewhat aimless young man studies astrogation rather than art. His eccentric aunt happens to win a spaceship as settlement of a libel suit and decides to take off in pursuit of a fabled Medical Clinic of Youth with her nephew as captain of the ship. So far so good.

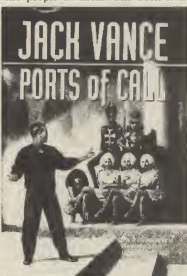
About 40 pages into the book, the

aunt fires her nephew, leaves him at a spaceport with enough money to buy passage home, and wanders off in her ship with a ne'er-do-well boyfriend running things.

The young man is miffed, but instead of returning home, he signs on as a crewman on a tramp freighter. We're now at page 45.

Nothing else happens for the rest of the book.

The tramp freighter with the young man aboard spends the remainder of the book going from port to port picking up freight and passengers and discharging the same. The ports feature interesting, very Vancian, cultures, and interesting, very Vancian, things happen to the people at them. The book is a



series of unconnected, often absurd, (but always entertaining) events. Imaginative and inventive, but unrelated.

If you've read much Vance, you'll know what I mean — this is like that but more so. And if you liked that sort of thing when you read it before, you'll like this too — it's very well done. But if you're looking for a story, read *Night Lamp* or the *Demon Princes* novels. This is not Vance for Beginners, but it is great fun for people who like Vance.

Rating: ★★☆☆ 1/2

Helm
By Steven Gould
Tor, 1998
330 pp., \$24.95

Steven Gould's first two books, *Juniper* and *Wildside*, were spectacular. *Helm* is very good, but not at the level of the first two.

A war in the mid-21st century rendered Earth uninhabitable, leaving about 9,000 survivors alive in space, many of them refugees who crowded onto every Earth-to-orbit rocket available. Because facilities don't exist to support that many people, and because the process of terraforming a nearby extra-solar planet had already begun, most of them were shipped off to this colony to live or die without help from Earth. (This whole business of near-Earth space facilities being so primitive, and yet the terraforming of an extra-Solar planet being underway, is *most* implausible. The dead hand of the Author intrudes.)

It's now hundreds of years later and mankind has thrived on the colony planet, which has fallen back to an early 1800s level of technology and is divided into numerous countries. The Helm is a piece of technology brought from Earth which turns out to be an educator that can be used only once a generation. The Helm is used to educate the heir to the throne of the most advanced statelet.

A younger son, who was not supposed to be the one to use the Helm, uses it, and is sent into a rigorous physical training program which, while interesting, seems mainly there to introduce lots of detail about Aikido, a martial art in which Gould is evidently very interested. His personal affairs form one thread of the story, while the political machinations in his father's statelet and in the kingdom of which it is a part form another, culminating in a civil war.

The young man saves everyone and everything.

Helm was entertaining, but, ultimately unconvincing. And the young man was far too lucky.

Still, Gould's worst book to date is better than most.

Rating: ★★☆☆ 1/2

God and All That



There was a time, in the bad old days of pulp SF, during what I call the Great Retarded Period, circa 1926-1940, when it was entirely impossible to discuss most serious matters in genre SF. Sure, there were speculative books published in the mainstream, like Huxley's *Brave New World* (emphatically trashed by the reviewer in *Amazing* in 1932) or John Collier's *Full Circle* or Vincent McHugh's *Caleb Catum's America*, which could partake of such freedoms as the mainstream of the era allowed, but let's face it, the SF field of today is not descended from those books. It is descended from 1926 *Amazing Stories*. It has, to be sure, absorbed some outside influences along the way — the absolutely hermetic seal of enforced illiteracy having begun to crumble as soon as Hugo Gernsback and T. O'Connor Sloane and their ilk were replaced by a new generation of editors, John W. Campbell and various Futurians — but we can still trace, and find significance in each new development, as one ghetto wall after another fell down, or was rebuilt.

There was a time when pulp SF was completely free of sex, both as a possible act contributing to the drama of a scene, and as a motivation for characters. There was a ritual called "love interest," derived from non-SF pulp formulas, but that was

another matter entirely, and it was discouraged. Romantic interests, 17-year-old editor Charles Hornig once solemnly intoned, either to Stanley Weinbaum or to Weinbaum's agent (and I forget which, but the story under consideration was *The Black Flame*, which Hornig rejected), would be regarded by the readers of *Wonder Stories* as "a weakness in a man."

During the Great Retarded Period, virtually everything had to be reinvented or rediscovered: politics, aging and death, alternative sexuality, etc. Somebody had to do it first, before it became possible to write about such a thing in science fiction.

For example, religion. Sure, there had always been stories about brave explorers landing on Mars and finding a humanoid culture there which is sort of like African/Aztec/Samoan culture only less interesting, where the priest-ridden natives are bent on sacrificing the pith-helmeted — er, I mean space-suited — strangers to the Great Ghod Ghu.

But let's get real. Serious SF about religion began to slip in through the pages of *Astounding* circa 1940, but, intriguingly, stories like Heinlein's *If This Goes On* — and Leiber's *Gather, Darkness!* (or, for that matter, Heinlein's *Sixth Column*) were about fake religions, political or social movements masquerading behind the guise of religion. Here, at least, was an acknowledgment that religion is an important sociological fact, but that the specific details are as variable from society to society as, say, the political power struc-

ture. But there was no room for theology in *Astounding*, the magazine of burly interstellar engineers who were as quick on the draw with a slide rule as with a fist. The only thing we were asked to take on faith was that the characters in the stories could actually believe this stuff. Heinlein in particular never managed to produce a convincing religious ideology. For that, you had to turn back to the mainstream wander-in writers; it's why Gore Vidal's *Messiah* is an infinitely better book than *Stranger in a Strange Land*. But I digress.

The pulp stories tended to be about the empty shell of religion, used for other purposes. They represented some progress. H.P. Lovecraft had suggested a few years earlier, in "Notes on Interplanetary Fiction," that religion, like royalty, was just a local Earth custom which would have no applicability in the universe at large. I am sure Lovecraft would never have denied that religion is a useful tool for manipulating the masses or making a pile of money, but he would have insisted that the scientific philosopher must get serious and put aside childish things.

James Blish, in 1953, writing as William Atheling, had some interesting observations on the subject. Go read the chapter called "Cathedrals in Space" in *The Issue at Hand*. Note with interest, but don't be distracted by, the way Atheling spends much of the essay reviewing (not necessarily favorably) the magazine version of "A Case of Conscience" by James Blish.

Rating System

★★★★★	Outstanding
★★★★	Very Good
★★★	Good
★★	Fair
★	Poor

One of the things that Blish noted was that most religious SF tends to be from a Catholic, often Jesuitical point of view. (Including, of course, *A Case of Conscience*.) Presumably the Fundamentalists, Born Yesterday Christians are simply not sophisticated enough to deal with such questions as human origins or xenobiology in an intelligent manner. But this would not preclude, say, sophisticated Lutheran SF. Why Catholic, then? The answer Blish seems to imply, and which I'd second, is that Catholic theology is ancient, brainy, and detachedly intellectual, and, in fact, rather like engineering once you accept the basic premise. It is not a matter of individual, mystical revelations or raptures, but of figuring out the rules of how things work. It is this aspect, not what Lovecraft would call "Popery," that is the key. What Martin Luther nailed onto a cathedral door would be as irrelevant to a native of Fomalhaut XI as the details of the Avignon papacy. But an intellectual system which has the capacity of extending Christianity as far as human beings can reach, incorporating (rather than denying) new data along the way, has considerably more potential, for both the interplanetary explorer and the science fiction writer.

Blish traces a few crude early examples, particularly Ray Bradbury's "The Man," and talks somewhat about C.S. Lewis, R.H. Benson, and M.P. Shiel, then flings the gauntlet down in front of us:

These science fiction stories are not fundamentally theological at all. Every one of them, including "Case" . . . are instead instruments of a chiliastic crisis, of a magnitude we have not seen since the world-wide chiliastic panic of 999 A.D., when everyone expected the Second Coming and the Last Judgment on the next New Year's Morning and nobody in his heart of hearts

could believe in the forgiveness of Christ. We no more believe in it now than we did then, and small wonder; and our modern Apocalyptic literature, overlaid though it is with the mythologies of scientific humanism and heroic technology, takes just as dim a view of it.

"Chiliastic," from the Greek, means "millennial." I think Blish is simplifying history a bit here, as surely only European Christendom, and only Western European Christendom at that, succumbed to calendar superstition. The leading Christian potentate of the time, Basil the Second (a.k.a. "The Bulgarian-Slayer") of Byzantium, was probably too busy conquering the Balkans to more than pause on December 31st, 999. Certainly the Caliph didn't care, nor did the Jews, nor the emperor of China.

Never mind. Blish's off-hand statement that nobody in his heart of hearts can believe in the forgiveness of Christ, and therefore we fear the millennium, is intriguing and is, I think, inherently theological.

So, is it possible even yet to write genuinely theological SF, or is it still just fake trappings and millennial jitters?

Children of God

By Mary Doria Russell
Villard Books, 1998
438 pp., \$23.95

This is a sequel to Ms. Russell's celebrated 1996 debut, *The Sparrow*, which, for all it didn't make any Hugo or Nebula ballots, is sort of the uncrowned winner of the period, a book being cited in many quarters as the SF book of the decade. There's no doubt Russell is a marvelous writer. The opening chapters of *The Sparrow* are so alive with wit and human feeling, with characters you'd really like to know and care about, that for whomever found this book in the slush-pile or wherever, it must have seemed a genuine (if non-theological) miracle.

The writing is superb. Here is a brilliant new find, a writer of such polish and seriousness that she could well go on to be the next Michael Bishop or the next Ursula Le Guin. *The Sparrow* is the story of the discovery of an inhabited planet in the Centaurus system, and a private (not secret, this being a fine and important distinction) Jesuit expedition thither. Like the first European missionaries in North America, Ms. Russell's Jesuits combine sincere faith with abysmal ignorance, with hideous results. The only survivor, Father Emilio Sandoz, returns, utterly defiled and degraded by the aliens, his faith, to put it mildly, in a serious state of crisis.

It seems the intelligent inhabitants of the planet Rakhat are divided into two species, one of which does most of the work and is bred to be docile and faithful to the other, which eats them. All this, in the context of the planet's ecosystem, makes sense, at least to the aliens. Both sides regard the other as immoral; tragedy results. The Jesuits, whose intention all along was to get to know and appreciate God's other children, and to "do no harm," may well have done quite a bit of harm inadvertently. Certainly they have caused (and gone through) a great deal of possibly needless suffering.

In the sequel, Father Sandoz is called back to Rakhat. The Jesuits aren't done with him. God isn't done with him. The effects of the human meddling continue to ripple through the alien society.

Like the previous volume, *Children of God* is brilliantly written. It shares the failing of *The Sparrow*, too, that the aliens, for all that they sound a bit like kangaroos or small dinosaurs with beautiful eyes, are entirely too human. It is almost certainly a mistake for the author, when writing from the viewpoint of one of these creatures, to refer to young

females as "girls," much less to write a passage like this:

Like most females of her caste, Jholaa Kitheri had been kept catastrophically ignorant, but she was not stupid. Allowed to see nothing of genuine importance, she was keenly observant of emotional minutiae — astute enough to wonder, even as a girl, if it was malice or simply thoughtless cruelty when, at her father's whim, she was allowed beyond her chamber and permitted to recline silently on silken cushions in a dim corner of an awninged courtyard during some minor state gathering. But even on those rare occasions, no one came near or even glanced in her direction.

"I might as well be made of glass or wind or time," Jholaa cried out at this indifference when she was only ten. "Srokan, I exist! Why does no one see me?"

"They do not see my most beautiful lady because she has the glory of the moons in her!" her Runa nursemaid said, hopping to distract the child.

(p.53)

If the ten-year-old "girl" has such completely human emotions and lies on silk under an awning in a courtyard and compares herself to glass, it is all too easy to forget that she's got a tail and may one day eat her nursemaid.

So what we have here is a descendant of utopian and Lost Race fiction, in which the "alien planet" is really a foreign country. The story, serious though it may be, is a kind of social/political allegory, not a convincing speculation about life on another planet. It is set on another planet merely because all the plausible locales on Earth have been explored or otherwise used up. There are speculations here, particularly about the nature of a predator/prey society, but the aliens themselves are no more convincing than *Star Trek* aliens (who might be summed up as a facial problem and an attitude).

Not surprisingly, the passages in both books which are entirely about the human characters are much more vivid and gripping. I am far more convinced by Russell's 21st-century Italy than by Rakhat.

The core of the novel, and its predecessor, is, *contra* Blish, genuinely theological. It is about what is variously called the Problem of Pain or the Problem of Evil or the Cruelty of God. It is about why God, who is allegedly all good and all knowing and all powerful, allows the seemingly pointless suffering of innocents. Father Sandoz is ultimately an innocent, as much as any of the alien babies who get eaten when the interfering humans enable the prey species to reproduce beyond its carefully balanced limits.

The book is about very profound questions of right and wrong, and its theological arguments sometimes eerily echo those used by the defense when God is put on trial in James Morrow's *Blameless in Abaddon*, about which more anon.

Is *Children of God* genuinely science fiction? Yes. If these aliens were more alien, everything would still work out the same. The alien experiences would still echo the human ones. Father Sandoz would still suffer and grapple with God. The plot does not depend on the flimsiness of the science-fictional trappings, as is so often the case on *Star Trek*. No, this is the real thing. And theological, too.

Rating: ★★☆☆

Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman

By Walter M. Miller

Bantam, 1997

434 pp., \$23.95

Certainly some of the jitters that produced Walter M. Miller's classic, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, were other than chiliastic or theological. Written at the height of the Cold War, at a time when school children went through meaningless atomic air-raid drills and "brinksmanship" was

the order of the day in international relations, Miller's book grew out of the image of post-Holocaust, neo-medieval monks carefully preserving scraps left over from the lost technological age, things the monkish scribes no longer understood but, they believed, were vitally important: a grocery list, a wiring diagram, etc. The key idea was that religion might become, again, the instrument for preserving secular knowledge in a dark age. But the book is about a lot more, and has proven to be one of the most durable of all SF novels, and certainly one of the key items in any consideration of science fiction about religion.

Now, almost forty years later, we have the sequel. Miller became, apparently, silent after *Canticle* was published in 1960. Rumors abounded. I heard variously that he had lost or gained his faith, or that otherwise he had undergone a change in his life which took away the need to write. But the truth of the matter seems to have been that he was writing a huge, substantial, often brilliant sequel, and he got 90% of the way through it and then got stuck. He described his attempts at completing the book as being like trying to spit through a screen door. Ultimately (though not for this reason alone, I am sure), he killed himself, and left the book unfinished, not a mess of notes and drafts, but a polished (or almost polished) final version that stopped just before the end. Terry Bisson was called in to write the last few chapters, and so here we have it.

It's actually (to steal a bastard term from I don't remember whom) a "middlequel," since the action takes place during the era of the middle section of *Canticle*. We are in a neo-Middle Age, in which the Papacy (in exile in about what used to be Oklahoma) is in conflict with the Texark Empire. The Church has become powerful and politically important, but it is also still in competition with "pagan" belief-systems of the Plains Nomads.

In the course of things we follow a disaffected monk who wants out of the Order of St. Leibowitz but is drawn deeper into Church intrigues even as he doubts (or tries to cast off) his faith and has visions of the pagan Wild Horse Woman, a cardinal who would rather be a lawyer and ends up pope, a Nomad who would probably rather be civilized and a Christian but can't turn away from his tribal customs, and so on. It's extremely complex, sometimes a little difficult to follow (particularly as people's names keep changing). Had Miller lived, the editor might have attached a few yellow tags to the manuscript and asked for clarifications and had the author compile a glossary and list of characters. But it's also the most sustained performance Miller ever managed, and it, like Mary Doria Russell's *Children of God*, turns on theological concerns, not so much the Cruelty of God, but God's way of ignoring individual aspirations in the interests of a larger Plan. There are lots of brilliant touches, a good deal of humor, and scenes of explicit sexuality which wouldn't have been possible in 1960. Credit must also go to Terry Bisson for rounding all this off so that we have a complete book, rather than an ambitious and frustrating fragment.

Rating: ★★☆☆

Blameless in Abaddon

By James Morrow
Harcourt Brace, 1996
404 pp., \$24.00

Here's a great book I should have reviewed a few columns ago. But it sort of slipped by, and it fits in *here*. Never mind. The trade paperback is certainly still available, and I haven't seen the hardcover remaindered yet. So, go find it in one form or another.

Blameless in Abaddon is more effortlessly theological than the previous books mentioned because it is fantasy of a familiar sort and doesn't have to balance the rationality of science with religion's inherently supernatural

assumptions. Its approach is to take Judeo-Christian premises at face value and then stand them satirically on their heads, forcing the reader to question if all of this is logical or good or makes any sense at all. We've had a tradition of such fantasies for at least a century now, going back to Mark Twain's "The Mysterious Stranger" and such works. Call it a comedy-blasphemy or satirical theology.

It's a sequel to *Towing Jehovah*, in which the corpse of God was found floating in the Atlantic and had to be towed to the Arctic before it rotted. Well, now it seems that the Corpus Dei has become part of a Fundamentalist theme park in Florida, but it has to be moved again, because some of the Divine brain cells are functioning, and it's possible to put God on trial in The Hague for crimes against humanity. The prosecution is led by a latter-day Job, a just man who has been visited by catastrophe after catastrophe. His wife drowns. He gets prostate cancer. He, like Job, demands to know why. On the defending side is a smarmy Christian millionaire-author, a caricature of C.S. Lewis. A legal battle ensues, raising in a very direct way the theological objections and defenses relating to why bad things happen to good people. What could become a long lecture is considerably enlivened by Morrow's comic invention, in a kind of *Fantastic Voyage* parody of a virtual-reality journey inside God's brain. Morrow does not lose track of his story. I won't tell you how it ends, but I suspect you will be satisfied by it, both amused and moved.

Since Twain stopped, no one has done this sort of thing better than James Morrow.

Rating: ★★☆☆

Noted:

*The Vampire's
Beautiful Daughter*
By S.P. Somtow
Atheneum, 1997
116 pp., \$17.00

This is part of a series of young adult books packaged by Byron Preiss, which have been largely ignored, I suspect, because they are the work of a packager and could well be just more book-product. You know: "We're doing a set of kids' fantasies, and we need one book about vampires, one about dragons, one about unicorns, one about ghosts . . ."

Well, look again. There have been some distinguished titles in this series, notably Tad Williams and Nina Kiriki Hoffman's *Child of an Ancient City* and Tanith Lee's *Black Unicorn*.

Now this, which is certainly the most satisfying Somtow book I've seen in a while. Most of his novels strike me as hugely ambitious, over-indulgent, and rushed: 50% of the best book you've ever seen, 25% considerably less than the best book you've ever seen, and 25% missing. The whole of, say, *Vampire Junction* is not as impressive as some of its parts.

This one hangs together. It's got a very convincing high-school-age narrator whose girlfriend's father is a vampire. She is to become one soon herself, in a ceremony rather like a coming-out or, if you'll pardon the pun, a batmitzvah. Romance ensues. There are some very funny bits, and a few eerie ones. The ending is touching. It would make a good movie for the teen audience.

Rating: ★★☆☆ 1/2

Virtual Unrealities

By Alfred Bester
Vintage, 1997
366 pp., \$14.00
Introduction by
Robert Silverberg

The name of Alfred Bester, as most of you hopefully know, is more than that of a character on *Babylon 5*. The real Bester was one of the great science fiction writers, who dazzled the field with *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination* in the '50s, then quit for a long while,

and came back in the '70s without quite meeting the raised expectations of his fans.

Actually, Bester's work divides neatly into three periods. That of the early '40s is largely apprentice work, published in *Thrilling Wonder*, *Astonishing*, and other second-string magazines. His best SF story of the period, "Adam and No Eve" (included here), appeared in John Campbell's *Astounding*. His best fantasy, the novella "Hell is Forever" (not included), appeared in Campbell's *Unknown*. When Bester returned to SF in 1950, he sold one story to Campbell, included here as "Oddy and Id." But when Bester met Campbell for the first time (as he told it later), Campbell was in the midst of his Dianetics obsession. He insisted all the Freudian terminology be taken out (and it was, the story being retitled "The Devil's Invention") because L. Ron Hubbard had just made Freud obsolete and science in *Astounding* had to be up-to-date. Campbell glowered and handed Bester a stack of paper and said, "Hubbard's going to win the Nobel Prize. Read this!" Poor Alfie Bester was stuck in John Campbell's office reading through the page-proofs of the original "Dianetics" article, trying desperately not to break out laughing. He came away with the impression that Campbell was a lunatic and never wrote for *Astounding* again.

That may have been a turning point, but I think that, in any case, Bester would have soon outgrown *Astounding*. The first story in the book, for instance, "Disappearing Act," is a razor-sharp parody of a Campbellesque engineering story and an effective satire on, variously, the military, specialization, and the McCarthy era. The story was published in *Star Science Fiction* in 1953, and it hasn't lost any of its edge. Great stuff, as are most of the others included here. As Silverberg points out in the introduction, whole textbooks could be written about the technique of "Fondly Fahrenheit."

What Bester and a few others had done, about 1952, was announce to such parts of the world as would listen that the Great Retarded Period of Science Fiction was over, and that it was now possible to publish SF as sophisticated as any fiction found anywhere. We've all had a rather spotty record in following this up, both writers and readers.

But fortunately, even in an era in which little old SF gets reprinted and the past of the field is forgotten as quickly as some inferior, bestselling writer can re-invent it, Bester's work still survives, as an example of what *should* be possible in SF.

This edition, by the way, contains a hitherto unpublished fragment and a complete story, "The Devil Without Glasses," unavailable anywhere else. The story is not quite Bester in top form. It was found among his papers. My guess is it's something he wasn't quite satisfied with and never got back to, as his career as a travel writer and editor of *Holiday* led him elsewhere.

Rating: ★★☆☆

The Postmodern Archipelago

By Michael Swanwick

Tachyon Publications, 1997

66 pp., \$7.50

Tachyon Publications is one of those admirable small presses that produces volumes which commercial publishers won't touch, and that often says more about the limitations of commercial publishing than anything

else. Look for their editions of Peter Beagle's *The Rhinoceros Who Quoted Nietzsche* (a Peter Beagle collection not commercial? Incomprehensible!) or Stanley Weinbaum's *The Black Flame* or Ward Moore's *Lot's Daughter*. The present item, I must admit, isn't likely to make it into your Barnes & Noble, though it probably *should*. It's a chapbook of two essays, originally from *Asimov's*. The first, "A User's Guide to the Post-Moderns" (1986), was an important discussion (not quite a manifesto) of the Cyberpunk movement which had a considerable impact at the time, defining said movement and making some writers react against the movement. "In the Tradition ..." tries to find a tradition in modern commercial fantasy and comes up with "hard fantasy." It's revolutionary in its own way, suggesting that something more ambitious than cloned trilogies or gaming novels in franchised universes can come out of the fantasy field. There was a time when that should have been obvious. Now it is necessary to state it again, clearly, and wittily, as Swanwick has.

Rating: ★★☆☆

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Nisi Granum Frumenti

By Joe Mayhew

Art by Cortney Skinner

The Most Rev. Eugene Hespeler, CR, Bishop of Hamilton, Bermuda, saw the sky outside the shuttle turn from deep-space black to blue. Soon, the clouds rising toward them broke, and it seemed to Gene as though they were flying over Earth again. It took almost an act of faith to believe that was Ursula's sun shining down through the breaks in the clouds, not his own. He felt the doubt grow in him — not about where he was, but about where he was going.

That sun, shining down into Pela's blue sky, was a star he had seen as a boy playing with a telescope in the friendly Ontario night. He knew it, but it did not connect him with the universe he knew. A cold, nightless ocean of profound darkness lay between his God's creation and this place. His Faith affirmed that the heavens united all creation, but his understanding balked.

Ursula's calm was probably no more solid than those opaque clouds around the shuttle. Gene wanted to do something to help her, but he was baffled. Until he agreed to perform her wedding, he had thought he knew nearly everything that mattered about her.

After all, hadn't he known her for thirty years?

Her name had been romanized on her University of Waterloo ID as "Yeracl Pelandimitsarmyh," but when she came to his office at St. Jerome's College for religious instruction, she had introduced herself as "Ursula." He had baptized her with that name, but now he wondered if it were only some sort of mask she had put on to live, as much as she could, as a Terran among Terrans. Ursula had never gotten around to telling him much of her life on Pela; she had shied away as if it were a repulsive subject. Then too, he had always been the one to do the talking. Right at that moment, he really regretted that.

Just before they had switched from the Pelan starship onto the shuttle, Ursula had said, "Part of me would like to go on being *Ursula* forever: a big part. As each year goes by, it becomes harder to let go of the life I have found here. I haven't thought of myself as Yeracl for a long time — at least not willingly. Perhaps that was a sin against my own nature: hiding in alienness."

She was the first alien he had met. The xenophobic riots in the United States had made the Yanks wary of all unnecessary conflict with the Pelen. But in pre-war Canada, the Pelen still had been allowed to live at liberty. That rainy night in September when she had appeared at his door, the news had been full of angry Canadian faces and pain. While there had been pain in Ursula's face, there had been no anger. She had come to receive Christ.

There was no precedent. The Superior of the Congregation of the Resurrection had insisted he get the consent of the Archdiocese, which, in turn, had sought instructions from the Vatican. To everyone's surprise, the decision was prompt. That was

because it did not come from any of the expected Congregations or Offices. For, as soon as he had heard of Ursula's desire to be baptized, the Pope had replied personally, "The call to grace is universal."

But, was it?

When Gene had been posted to Kentucky as chaplain to the Canadian prisoners of war, Ursula had volunteered to accompany him as Red Cross observer. Each time he had given last rites before a lethal injection (and there had been so many of them), Ursula had been there, listening and understanding. In those days, she was the only one he could stand around him after an execution. She seemed to have the same stoic acquaintance with the face of death as he felt, perhaps also the same sad longing. It was wrong to hate one's nature, but her company made him feel as though there was a way to find grace through it.

How old was she? He wondered at her extensive grasp of politics and history. It would have taken several lifetimes for him to catch up with her knowledge of the hard sciences, and yet she seemed rather a slow learner. Slow but steady. After thirty years, her Christian faith was still rather unsophisticated. But yet, he knew it was terribly important to her.

It was for that reason that he had agreed to come here to perform her wedding — that and the opportunity to perhaps make a few converts. Now, he was beginning to understand that he was seeking some fixed point outside his nature against which he might be able to measure himself.

She had told him that her clan would select the one to whom she would be wed. However, when it came to the question of raising her children as Christians, Ursula had assured him, "Father Gene, they will be exactly as Christian as I am. In time, my whole clan will share my Catholic Faith."

As the shuttle descended, the land below began to look less familiar, although it still didn't seem alien, merely foreign.

Ursula pointed down to a graceful concatenation of buildings in a park. "That's Dimitsarmyh, my clan's home."

"Do they all live there?"

"No. Only the few who are chosen to serve our home actually live there. For the most part we awaken here and only return when it is time to be wed."

The shuttle floated down to land beside a nest of Pelan fliers. Ursula's clan-sister Repchal came back to speak to Gene for the second time. "Most Reverend Eugene Hespeler, it would be better for you to say goodbye to Yeracl here on the shuttle. It really would be easier for both of you. Please, Yeracl, insist that he return to the starship now."

But Ursula did not flinch. "Repchal, Bishop



Hespeler has received the Torg's pledge of hospitality. He is here to perform the Christian sacrament for me."

With an impatient shrug, Repchal opened the shuttledoor and gestured outward.

A group of Pelen awaited them just beyond a high gate. It was covered with rhythmic mosaic forms that sparkled merrily in the midday sun. Behind the gate, eccentric structures blended with the sinuous flesh of giant mushroom trees: chocolate brown against buff and gray.

Gene thought that the great Catalan sculptor Gaudi would have found this place. It would have reminded him of his *Sagrada Familia* in Barcelona.

When the Pelen came forward, surrounding Ursula, Gene felt like a piece of inconvenient baggage. At last the Torg made a show of personally greeting him. After she had placed a garland of delicate blue and lemon colored spoor-cases around his neck, the others dutifully took notice of him — if without enthusiasm.

The Torg was a daughter of Ursula's sister. The resemblance was strong. Ursula's skin was perhaps a shade more violet, and the startling mane of goldenrod which framed the Torg's slender face, in Ursula's case was trimmed to the current Canadian fashion. Otherwise, they were as alike as twins.

The Torg said, "The Most Reverend Eugene Hespeler delights us with his knowledge of our Pelen speech."

Gene attempted to reply with the filigreed deference required, "That is to the credit of Yeracl's patience and regard for the tradition of her sacred clan."

The Pelen exchanged hopeful looks and visibly relaxed. "And now," said the Torg, "we will leave it to Yeracl to show you our home crechè."

With that, the Torg led everyone thorough the sparkling gate and into Dimitsarmyh's park. Gene deliberately brushed against the thick meaty leaves of a Pelen mint tree. The slight high one could get from their spores would help him to relax. Those mint trees had become popular on Earth until the Yanks outlawed them and sprayed a fungicide into Canada's air.

As they headed up the sandy ramp toward the crechè, there was a small crustacean struggling with a daub of fresh stucco twice its size. It seemed headed toward a chipped place in the wall near the door's molding.

As they entered the crechè, Ursula said, "I feel alone here now. The last of my sisters was wed twenty years ago."

Gene saw a cart with a dozen newborn Pelen in it. Gene held out his finger toward one. It seized onto his finger and started to climb up his hand.

"They're so alert. When do you start with their education?"

"That must wait until after they recover from *epos*."

As a nurse came out of the door at the end of the corridor, something cried out in agony. He turned to Ursula to see her change color and stiffen. The nurse went past them into another room. While the door was open, Gene could see that the room was filled with large, casnet-like boxes. Strange rustling and clicking sounds underscored a random chorus of high-pitched squeaking. There was also the sound of sobbing. When the door was closed, Gene noticed that Ursula was gasping painfully for air. Gene practically carried her

outside through the nearest exit.

"Ursula, what was in that room?"

She answered in a thick, husky voice, "The nests."

He had brought her into a courtyard filled with Pelen children being shepherded by a few nurses. The young Pelen wore no clothing and yet, without the usual punctuation such as one finds on human bodies (nipples, genitals, etc.), Gene felt no sense of their being naked. The children had small buds protruding from the central base of their pectoral muscles. The buds were barely noticeable in the smaller ones and were the same violet-mauve as their skin. In the older children they grew proportionately larger and gradually changed to fuschia.

To Gene, Ursula seemed out of place among her family. Perhaps it was in part because she was still wearing Canadian clothing. The Pelen he had seen went about nearly as naked as their children, wearing only ankle-length cloaks, shoes, and a sort of shield over their solar plexi. Ursula had always worn such a shield under her clothing, but nothing like these heavy metal ones the nurses wore.

"Ursula, I think one of the children is playing some sort of game with us," said Gene. After he said it, he thought that "child" was an odd word for someone just a bit taller than himself. One of the Pelen youngsters appeared to be stalking them.

Gene turned around abruptly when he sensed the Pelen was just behind him. Its bud was moving.

The Pelen leapt onto Ursula's back, knocking her down. Gene tried to pull it away from her, but the young Pelen was strong and agile. As it clawed at Ursula's shield, she made no attempt to resist. At last, Gene managed to twist the frenzied adolescent off her. As he struggled with the creature, he felt its bud clawing or gashing at his shirt and chest. It bit him just once and then broke away. As it pulled from him, Gene saw that the bud had a set of sharp, spiny teeth beneath its lips.

A nurse quickly cornered the Pelen adolescent and stunned it with her baton. It collapsed as soon as she touched it.

Ursula sat up, closing her blouse over the pale blue shield. One of the nurses scolded her as she helped her onto her feet, "You should have put on a breastplate before coming in here!"

Gene watched the nurses carry the unconscious youngster away. "Why in God's name didn't they help you?"

Ursula replied in English, "It was my fault. I'll be all right again in a minute. Sometimes they reach *epos* before the nurses notice. For that reason, no one ever comes into the nursery without a breastplate."

She was still breathing heavily as she led Gene down a cobblestone pathway toward a gate that led out of the playground. He tried to follow her through the gate, but some sort of force barrier held him back. Ursula returned for him and drew him close beside her. She said, "The barrier is keyed to shields so that only adults can go through. That keeps everyone safe."

Gen wondered what was supposed to be safe about that sinister place.

There was a steep ramp that led down into what looked rather like a zoo. Around a raised circular platform there were a number of force-cages. In each of the

cages was a wild and filthy young Pelan. Some paced like tigers, others clawed at the nearly invisible force frames. One appeared to be howling, but the sound was trapped inside the frames.

Gene was so taken aback by what he saw that he blurted out, "How barbaric!"

Ursula placed both palms against her shield and said a silent prayer. Then she looked at Gene and said, "They are in *epos*. It is necessary to keep them apart until they can wed."

"Wed!" Gene sputtered in English. "Good God! Surely not to one of those beasts! Why can't you give them something to calm them down until they get over their 'epos'?"

"That would be a — *sin*," Ursula said, searching for the right word.

"A *sin*? Just what would he so evil about making your kids a little less crazy? You Pelan can manipulate genes so well that your bugs practically deliver the mail. So, why haven't you —"

Ursula had fled at his outburst. She had stopped as suddenly, however, in front of one of the cages. Gene hurried after her. Ursula's face was becoming discolored and covered with sweat. Inside the cage, a young Pelan lay in a twisted heap. His hands were wrapped around some unpleasant fruit or small animal. It was a pod, his own, for the roots trailed back and into a raw hole at his solar plexus. The pod's jaws were convulsing. A mass of writhing maggots was pulsing out of it in a dark, purple fluid.

Gene tried to pull Ursula away from the cage, but she wouldn't budge, all the while pressing her hands desperately against her shield.

Gene asked gently, "Should I get help?"

Ursula muttered something.

Gene asked, "Is he dead?"

She whispered, "No, she isn't."

For a while, Ursula stood in front of the cage, trembling; finally she took Gene's hand and let him lead her away from the cage. Gene wanted to get both of them back onto the shuttle as quickly as he could. Why had he ever agreed to come? She had said she wouldn't be able to do it without his help. He hoped she would let him help now, but he could feel her drifting, far away and lost. That made him feel very alone.

They walked together through the dark, mint-scented shadows of Dimitsarmy park in silence. At one point, she started to speak, "So sad — too late —"

After a while she sat down on a bench beneath a mint tree. Gene didn't want to argue with her. Perhaps she could explain it; maybe that would make her feel better. So he asked, "Why don't they tranquilize them?"

Ursula whispered hoarsely, "If we drugged our *Epos*, there would be no children. You saw, but still don't understand. Right now you are condemning us for our nature. But it is the way God made us."

Gene thought of the pathetic creature lying in its cage. "Will he be lost?"

"No. She will not be lost. In a while, she will awaken into her adulthood. Before she could ever learn what happened to her *varr*, she will wed. Our clan is merciful."

"Ursula, what, exactly, are her 'varr'?" Gene wondered he saw something of the nightless dark in her golden eyes.

"Father Gene, the life of our species is regenerated in the *varr*. When an *Epos* pulls out his pod, his *varr* cannot survive. If they aren't nourished from the mother's body, their genes are not completed. If they could, somehow, be kept alive, there would be no learning in them."

"Then, Ursula, the *varr* are what was in his pod?" Gene tried to hide his disgust.

Ursula smiled, but it was forced. "You find your own biology disgusting, don't you, Father Gene? You think perhaps you'd prefer to be a machine."

Gene plucked a mint tree pad and began to nibble on it, soothing his mind. "I suppose you had to go through *epos* yourself. Do you remember much about it?"

"I — I remember nothing before my awakening. I must have transmitted my pod. I hope it was welcomed." She pressed both hands against her shield and looked away.

Gene had wondered why she never talked about her childhood. Now he thought he understood — but then, perhaps he did not. Was the closeness he had felt with her only an illusion?

"Those who have memory of things happening before their awakening cannot be civilized. Some escape into the wild and join the primitives. Some kill themselves or are discovered in time, and are destroyed."

Gene spat out the mint pod.

"They would carry their gene for that memory back into the clan if they were wed."

Repchal was coming down the path toward them. As she drew near, she said, "Pardon my intrusion, Yeracl, but the Torg feels that it would be for the best if you were wed tonight."

"So soon," said Ursula sadly. It wasn't a question.

Repchal bowed and placed her palms across her shield. "The Torg says we should assemble at the alignment."

Gene took Ursula's hand. "Ursula, let's get out of here. Come back to Earth before —"

She pulled her hand away. "Gene, it is too late."

"Like Hell, like bloody Hell it is!" Gene said in English. "They're sending you off to be raped by one of those filthy maniacs. Let them find some other victim for their pod full of maggots!"

Ursula slapped his face.

Gene felt the sting deep within his soul. He felt ashamed.

She said, "Father Gene, I am going to die tonight."

That hit him harder. Something like the pit of Hell yawned ahead.

"Try to understand me, Gene," Ursula took both of his hands into hers, pressing them together. "Pray for me. I am coming apart inside. I've never been able to tell you about this wedding I face. I didn't know how to make sense of it in just words. As with your people, our minds are sometimes at war with the nature of our flesh. Perhaps that is why I was attracted by your celibate clergy. But now I am ready to accept my own physical reality and what must be for me."

Gene felt his cold reasoning soul stir. He said, "Are you talking about suicide?"

Ursula shook her head from side to side as she said, "No — no — no. Remember your sermon on *Nisi*

granum frumenti? 'Unless a grain of wheat fall on the ground and dies, it remains just one grain. But if it dies it yields a great harvest.' It was that passage in the Gospel of Saint John which drew me to accept your Faith. Until I read that passage, your Earth religion did not seem to have much to do with me as a Pelan. But now I see that Christ was speaking to me, too, even as I hid from my nature on your planet. I must, like the grain, die to myself so that many new lives can come forth."

What bone-chilling blasphemery! Gene pulled away from her and ran blindly back inside the creche. He felt like a frightened child hiding in the body of a 61-year-old man. His heart was beating furiously, ticking away his life, moving that last, black wall closer with each pulse.

Repchal found him wandering through the halls. She said, "Go back to the shuttle before you cause any more harm."

He looked at her as if she were a marble statue. Then he realized she would one day share the same fate that was taking Ursula from him.

Gene was a bit surprised to hear himself asking her, "Repchal, what becomes of your soul when you die?"

She passed her hand through her thick goldenrod mane, just as Ursula would have. "When we awaken there are many gifts. Our clan's ageless wisdom has accumulated in us. When we are wed, that wisdom passes to the next generation."

"Do you mean that you have all your mother's memories?"

"No, only her learning, and thus, the learning of countless generations. When we awaken, it is to the light of our entire civilization."

"Then you know the souls of all your ancestors, the personal memories."

"Personal memories are only darkness. In childhood they block out all learning."

"Do you believe in a personal soul? Is there something of the individual who you are that lives on after you die?"

"Most Reverend Eugene Hespeler, please go back to the shuttle. Your questions are unwelcome."

"Because you have no answers?"

Repchal paused as if to digest his question. She said, "Please follow me. I will show you our nest. Do not touch anything you see."

He followed her to the room full of open caskets. What he saw in there made him think of crabs clicking and devouring softer creatures. There were bodies in some of the boxes. Here was one being excavated by bloated larvae. As the varr grew larger they developed shell casings. A large varr with a shell so heavy and closed that it could hardly move was busy eating through the leathery bag of one of its siblings. In a box with a fresh body there were seemingly hundreds of tiny varr. In the next box the mother's body was gone, replaced by nine or ten egg-like varr. How could Ursula be a part of this horror?

A weeping sound came from a box deeper in the room. There were eight mottled shells inside, somewhat translucent.

One was broken open. Curled up inside the half-absorbed shell fragment was a tiny Pelan. Its hatching cry no longer sounded like human sobbing.

Gene moved carefully away. Repchal closed the door behind them and waited angrily.

When Gene remained silent, she said, "To answer your question, there is nothing left over. All that we are is consumed and passed on to our clan. When I am wed, what I have contributed will live on in my children. All that I have learned since awakening, all that passed to me from my mother's body will be reborn. My personal memories are only emotions written on the wind of time, but our soul knowledge is immortal."

Repchal suddenly lightened and said with a laugh, "My own children will know you were here, but they will not know of my anger at you. Isn't it better that way? Yeracl has brought back much new learning from your planet. In time, through her children, that knowledge will pass into all of our clan and become a part of our shared heritage."

"What will become of her Faith?"

"The information will be transmitted; the decision to believe or reject it will be up to each child as it awakens."

Gene smiled thinly. "Yeracl has become a Christian. It would help her to find peace if I could give her the last rites of our Faith before she is wed."

"If Yeracl insists," said Repchal, "the Torg will permit it. But Most Reverend Eugene Hespeler, you intrude beyond decency."

When Gene found Ursula, he was relieved to see she still wore her pectoral shield. Memories of the POW camp executions in Kentucky darkened his mind as he put on his stole to hear her last confession. She wasn't strapped to a gurney. There was no IV link in her arm, but, just the same, she would be dead within the hour.

After her confession, Ursula said, "I believe I have a personal destiny that God will preserve intact. It is not just the knowledge I will transmit through my body. Neither is it only what my people reject as 'personal memories.'"

The Most Reverend Eugene Hespeler, C.R., Bishop of Hamilton, Bermuda, completed the last rites with one further sacrament. He ordained Ursula as a priest. Her children would need that. □

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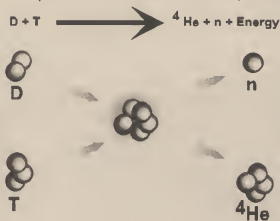
Nuclear energy comes in two flavors. The first is the more familiar, garden-variety flavor — nuclear fission.

Take a really bloated atom, one with just too many neutrons and protons for its own good, like a blood-gorged leech. If it eats just one more bite, it will explode. In the case of a uranium or plutonium atom, that one more bite takes the form of a neutron.

When a neutron is absorbed, the bloated atom splits into two atoms of smaller mass, plus several more neutrons. When you add up the mass of all these particles, you discover that it comes to something slightly less than the weight of the original atom and neutron.

Where did that missing mass go? Well, if we know only a single equation, it surely must be: $E = mc^2$, where E is energy, m is the missing mass, and c^2 is the speed of light squared. Split an atom and you get energy courtesy of just a bit of its mass being consumed during the splitting. If you split a lot of atoms, then you get a lot of energy.

Well, man has mastered the technology of splitting atoms. Whether in the form of nuclear reactors or atomic bombs, the process is all the same — a bloated atom splits and in the process gives off energy and neutrons. Those neutrons in turn cause more atoms to split. If you can control the production of neutrons you have a process suitable for a nuclear reactor. If you let the neutrons go on producing more and more neutrons you have a runaway chain reaction and a device



Basic Fusion Reaction

Photo courtesy of JET

suitable for turning cities into glass-bottomed craters.

We are all pretty familiar with this.

Now, the other flavor of nuclear energy relies on atoms from the opposite end of the spectrum. Those atoms are extremely lightweight, such as hydrogen (just a single proton and an electron) or its close isotopic relatives deuterium (one proton, one neutron, and one electron) and tritium (one proton, two neutrons, and one electron). If you take these atoms and fuse them together, you discover that the atom you make is just a bit lighter in weight than the weight of your starting atoms. Again this change in mass results in the production of energy.

Even though this is similar to the way in which energy is generated in the case of fission, the similarities end there. While a heavy atom suitable for fission needs just a nudge to break apart, a huge amount of energy is needed to cause two lightweight atoms to fuse.

Think about billiard balls. If you slam one billiard ball into

another they don't form one big billiard ball. Instead, they bounce off each other in opposite directions. This is typically what happens when atoms come into contact with one another — they go bouncing off in opposite directions.

However, if those billiard balls are coming at each other with enough energy, rather than bouncing, they may shatter one another, forming a big mound of billiard-ball bits. Here our billiard ball analogy breaks down. If two hydrogen atoms come crashing together at high

enough energy, they typically do not shatter into smaller parts (let's not get into quarks here), but they may actually fuse, creating a larger atom.

How do you get atoms moving really fast, so that they might fuse to form a larger atom? To an atom, high energy and fast movement are synonymous with heat. Heat up a gas and the atoms within it start moving faster, bouncing into each other with greater force. Heat them up enough and a few of those atoms may fuse, and in the process give off energy. This is just how the sun works. This is also how hydrogen bombs work.

In the case of an H-bomb, the hydrogen atoms within it fuse when the bomb gets really hot. Typically this heat is generated by first detonating a garden-variety fission bomb. Imagine that, using an atomic bomb as little more than a fuse to set off the big explosion. Yes, fusion derived processes certainly pack a lot of energy.

So if nuclear fission works in both bombs and reactors, and

nuclear fusion works as a bomb, shouldn't there be some way to use nuclear fusion in a more controlled manner to produce energy?

Yes.

Researchers have been working on this for nearly half a century. The two existing proofs of fusion reactions — the sun and hydrogen bombs — provided models for the method of achieving fusion energy. The idea is to get some lightweight atoms extremely hot, so hot that they fuse as a result of high-energy collisions and then give off energy as a bit of mass is consumed in the process. In essence, all you need to do is build a little sun.

Easier said than done.

The problem with the sun, or a hydrogen bomb as it's exploding, is that the damn things are really hot. It is hard to keep such a hot thing under control. When you have heat of several million degrees, *anything* that comes in contact with it is instantly vaporized.

So what to do? The only way to contain material at such temperatures is with magnetic and electric fields. Any *charged* particle can be moved by an electric or magnetic field. Fortunately, when you start to heat up an atom, an object which has neutral charge, it will lose some of its outer electrons, which are negatively charged; as a result, the electron-light atom, which is now called an ion, is positively charged. Both the electron and the ion can be moved about by electric and magnetic fields.

This principle of controlling charged particles by fields has been at the core of fusion research since day one. These magnetic and electric fields form a type of bottle which contains these very hot electrons and ions (called a plasma). At the moment, the reigning champ in the field of fusion research is a reactor called the Joint European Torus (JET). The JET produces big boatloads of fused hydrogen atoms.

However, the production of fused atoms does not make this a workable fusion reactor. Unlike the case of a fission reaction, in which you start getting useful

energy out as soon as the first atom splits, that is not the case for the fusion reactor. The reason is that it takes a great deal of energy to get the plasma hot enough to start the fusion process.

Remember, fusion will not take place until those hydrogen atoms are really slamming into each other, and that requires a lot of heat. The reactor is only useful if the energy obtained from the fusion reactions is greater than the energy that you have to put into the plasma to heat it up.

JET is currently the most efficient experimental reactor in existence — it only consumes twice as much power in heating the plasma as is generated from the fusion reaction. It is getting close to break-even (the condition where power in equals power out), but it's not there yet, and the machine may not be capable of reaching that point. The global fusion research community believes that a bigger reactor, one based on the JET design, needs to be built in order to demonstrate break-even.

This new beast is called the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER). This thing is a real monster. It is 50 feet across, has a current of 24 million amps running through its plasma, and generates fusion power of 1.5 billion watts. It runs on a fuel mixture of deuterium and tritium. These two atoms fuse to create an ionized helium atom (more typically called an alpha particle) and neutrons. The neutrons carry about 80% of the energy generated by the fusion reaction. Because they are energetic neutrons and have no charge, they cannot be contained in the ITER by its magnetic and electric fields. The neutrons stream through the walls of the reactor. Super-tough vanadium-steel is used to slow down the neutrons. In the act of slowing them down (through the process of collisions), the energy of the neutrons is transferred into the steel and surrounding reactor as heat.

It is this heat which is used to generate steam, which in turn can be used to drive a turbine, which then generates electricity. ITER

does all these things — at least it does all these things on paper. *It does not yet exist.* It sits on the drawing board. A consortium consisting of the US, Japan, Europe, and Russia *had* agreed to foot the bill for ITER. Total cost for the project is currently estimated at \$10 billion.

Construction was supposed to begin right now.

But it has been put off for at least three years.

The US contingent is starting to get cold feet, wondering if perhaps there is not a more efficient, smarter, and cheaper way to achieve a workable fusion device. And as always, Russia is strapped for cash. This leaves only the Japanese and the Europeans to foot the bill — and it might be too expensive for them to go it alone.

So is that it?

Is fifty years of fusion research about to come to a halt? Is this whole process of building little suns in magnetic/electric field bottles about to go the way of the buggy-whip? Maybe, maybe not.

NIF

Physics is physics. If you want to fuse atoms, you have to get them very energetic and close to one another. That is a fact of fusion. You have little flexibility there. But where you do have flexibility is in how you get those atoms hot. Can you only get atoms hot enough to fuse by building a little sun? No.

Another approach is being developed by researchers at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory in California, called the National Ignition Facility (NIF). Their approach starts off with a 1.8 million joule laser (100 joules is the energy that a 100-watt light bulb burns in one second). Now, you might do the math and think that doesn't sound like all that much energy — just the equivalent of what 18,000 100-watt light bulbs burn in one second. Or you could look at it as equivalent to the energy burned by a single 100-watt light bulb operating for 18,000 seconds (which is five hours). Now, that doesn't sound like much energy, does it? How can a laser that

puts out only the amount of energy that a 100-watt light bulb burns in five hours possibly fuse atoms, when people building little suns can't seem to get the job done?

It's all a question of power. Power is defined as the amount of energy you consume over a given amount of time. In the case of one joule, that is equivalent to one watt consumed in one second. However, one joule is also equivalent to 10 watts consumed in 0.1 seconds. Do you see where this is headed? If you burn energy really fast, you generate huge power levels. The faster you burn, the higher the power for the same amount of total energy. But of course, those power surges last for only a short period of time. The researchers at Livermore have a laser that packs its punch in only 0.5 million-millionths of a second. For that small period of time, the power reaches 1,250 million-million watts. This is 1300 times more power than can be generated by the entire US electrical grid. But of course, it only does it for an incredibly short period of time.

But that is the key. You compress the light-bulb-like energy of the laser into incredibly short time periods. And then what do you do with it? You focus the laser on a small pellet (the size of a pea) that contains deuterium and tritium (the same fuel as used by the little sun crowd). The outer layer of the pellet is vaporized, blowing outward, which in turn sends an inward shock wave which compresses the deuterium and tritium fuel. This compression heats the fuel to temperatures of up to 100 million degrees — much hotter than the center of the sun. At those temperatures fusion will take place, generating the same alpha particles and neutrons as in the case of ITER. Again, for this scheme to work, you need to generate more power from the fusion process than you do in running the laser.

This approach is less mature than the little sun approach. NIF is currently under construction and should start firing its laser at little pellets in the next few years.

Will this be the way to achieve a working fusion system? No one really knows. They are going to have to build it and just see what it does.

Cold Fusion

NIF is certainly different from ITER, but it shares many things in common. Both those approaches get atoms incredibly hot, so that when they collide they can smash together and form a larger atom. Is there another way to get these atoms close together, a tricky way that might not require them to get so hot? Well, there might just be. It is first necessary to consider just what an atom is.

An atom is certainly very small, but the neutrons and protons that make up its core are substantially smaller. An atom's size is the swarm of electrons that buzz about it. An electron has an incredibly small mass, and it is because of that small mass that it has a relatively large size.

What?

Now, that doesn't make sense when you first hear it. The problem is that when you start talking about things as small as an electron, you enter a physical realm that is dominated by quantum mechanics. When something weighs as little as an electron, it is no longer a particle. It is not correct to think of it as being just a really small speck of dust. When objects have as little mass as an electron, they start to behave not like a particle, but like a wave, or a ripple. You can view the electron as a type of smeared-out entity, almost like a piece of fog. As a result, even though it doesn't weigh much, it is spread out over a fairly large volume. It is the electrons that determine the size of the atom, even though it is the neutron and protons that determine its weight.

So, if you could do something with those electrons, make them heavier, then the atom itself would be physically smaller, since the smearing out of the electron, or the region of fog which it makes up, would become smaller. In this way, when two of these shrunken atoms come together, they could get much closer before banging head on and bouncing apart. Another way of looking at it is that you wouldn't need to get these atoms as hot in order to get them to fuse, since it's easier to get them closer together because they are smaller to begin with.

Is there a way to make an electron heavier? Well, not really. However, you can replace the electrons of an atom with another type of particle called a muon. A muon has the same negative charge as an electron, but it has a mass 200 times greater. Researchers at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory in Oxfordshire, Britain, are making muonic forms of matter by replacing the electrons with muons, and as a result are able to slam muonic-based atoms together at relatively low temperatures and get them to fuse. The challenge to this approach is that muonic matter lasts for a very short period of time, quickly decaying back into normal matter, and the fusion reaction must take place before this happens. Will they be able to make a power-producing fusion reactor out of this

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approach? Only further experiments will tell.

Z-Machine

In the conventional ITER type reactor, the bulk of the machine consists of the monstrous magnets and coils that generate the electric and magnetic fields that hold the million-degree plasma in the reactor. Is there another way to confine the plasma, a way that does not require tons and tons of hardware? Well, it turns out that there is. If you take an ordinary wire, any wire will do, and pass a current through it, you will generate a magnetic field around that wire.

Is there a way to exploit that fact in the quest of a fusion reactor?

You bet there is. Researchers at Sandia National Laboratory in Albuquerque, New Mexico, are using that simple bit of physics to build what they have called the Z-machine. Imagine if you will a Christmas ornament, a standard glass sphere. Now imagine that you use very thin metal wires and run them from the top of the Christmas ornament to the bottom, making sure that the wires hug the Christmas ornament. Then get rid of the Christmas ornament. What you are left with is an array of thin wires — something that looks like the longitude lines on a globe. Well, if you pass a big jolt of current through them very quickly (this is similar in concept to the NIF laser, in which huge power levels are reached by compressing the laser pulse to really short periods of time), you can dump a huge amount of power into these wires. In the Z-machine, so much power is dumped that the wires vaporize and turn into a plasma. However, just before they vaporize, the current being sent through them generates a huge magnetic field.

Well, all this is happening so fast that the magnetic field is still present when the wires vaporize, and this magnetic field compresses all the ions that have been generated by the vaporizing wires. This is sort of like lifting yourself up by your own bootstraps. Using this approach, the Z-machine has

produced about 20% of the energy, 40% of the power, and 50% of the temperature required for nuclear fusion to produce more energy than it consumes. The Sandia team is now looking for \$1 billion or so from the Department of Energy to build a bigger version, the X-1, which just may be able to produce more power than it consumes.

Colliding Beam Fusion

So far, all these approaches, no matter how varied they are, rely on the fusing of deuterium and tritium, which produces an alpha particle and neutrons. Part of what makes all these fusion approaches difficult in terms of building the type of machine one would need to install in a power generating plant is that you need to extract the energy out of the neutrons, heating up something like water, and then using the steam to turn a turbine. It's very difficult to stop an energetic neutron. You need steel that is meters thick.

Now, if you could come up with a fuel mix that did not generate neutrons, but only charged particles, those which could be captured and manipulated by electric and magnetic fields, then you wouldn't need all that shielding to stop the neutrons.

In addition, if you have a charged particle, by definition you have a source of electrical current. The current running through any power cord is nothing more than moving electrons, where an electron is just a particle that has a negative charge. Any charged particle, whether positively or negatively charged, if it is moved, can be viewed as a current. Current is nothing more than moving charge. So, if your fusion reaction generated nothing but charged particles, these could be grabbed by magnetic and electric fields, and the energy of those particles would move them along in those fields. Moving charges mean current. This would be a much more direct approach to generating power, cutting out all that extra business of neutron-stopping, shielding, and converting water into steam and using

the steam to turn turbines in order to generate electricity.

Well, it so happens that if you run a fuel which consists of protons and boron, they will fuse to produce only alpha particles, which are charged. Using this fuel mixture cuts out all the middle-man steps to energy production, making it a much more efficient approach. But as we all know, there is no such thing as a free lunch. If you put this fuel in an ITER or NIF-type reactor, for fusion to take place, the temperatures must be even higher than those required for a more typical deuterium-tritium reaction. This means you need to put in more power to start the fusion reaction, and as a result, you will need to generate more fusion power before you reach the break-even point. But everything is a trade-off, since the electricity you eventually produce is produced much more efficiently.

Neutron Generator

All the approaches described here, even the muonic-based cold fusion approach, still require that you get the atoms pretty hot in order to make them fuse. Is there some way in which you can eliminate all this heating business?

There is. All these systems heat in order to get the ions in the plasma moving really fast. There is, however, another way to get ions moving really fast.

If you take an ion (a positively charged deuterium ion in this case) and drop it in the vicinity of a metal plate that is held at a negative voltage, the ion will accelerate toward the plate. Remember the old adage that opposites attract. Well, the larger the negative voltage, the faster the ion accelerates. Eventually the ion will strike the negatively charged plate, and the game is over. However, imagine that instead of a plate, you have a metal ball, one with a lot of holes punched in it — in fact, a ball which is much more holes than actual ball. If you place the negative charge on it, as the ion is accelerated toward it, in most cases it passes right through the holes and rushes into the cen-

ter of the ball. If you've got other ions racing into the center of the ball, they may collide and fuse.

Professor George Miley at the University of Illinois has built such a device by placing a charge of 60,000 volts on the sphere in order to accelerate the deuterium ions. When they pass into the center of the sphere, they collide with other rapidly moving deuterium ions and fuse. No muss and no fuss. He has built these fusion reactors. Some sit on top of his desk.

About the size of a basketball, and costing less than \$60,000, these little reactors produce a boatload of neutrons by way of the fusion reaction taking place. The only problem with this approach right now is that the boatload they produce is only equivalent to what might be held in a rowboat. For a fusion reactor to be economically viable, you need a boat the size of the *Titanic*. But he is working on ways to increase his neutron yield.

So there you go. Who knows what the future for fusion research holds. Perhaps ITER will be built, work wonderfully, and reactors based on its design will generate more power than mankind will know what to do with. But if that approach fails, it certainly does not mean that the goal of a fusion-based reactor is dead. There are plenty of other approaches waiting in the wings, just hoping for the leader of the fusion pack to falter, to slow down, or to take a single misstep, allowing a new and novel approach to take the lead.

This is a race.

It is difficult to tell which approach will win this race, but like all races, there eventually is a winner. And in the final analysis, when it comes to the production of new energy sources, that is all that really matters. □

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The Chaldron

By Chris East

Art by N. Taylor Blanchard

Tom Danoff stared out at the vast gorge, fascinated by its enormity. Some people thought the bottom was impossible to see from the cliffside, forever bathed in impenetrable shadow. Danoff knew better, of course; today, he could see a bare strip of rock hundreds of feet below him. He tended to look at the cliff itself, however, all the juts and ridges and overhangs. *I wonder how many hapless losers have plunged into this pit*, he wondered.

"We are here today," said Vernon Heller, aged voice cracking, "to mourn the passing of a fellow villager, Andrew Brackett." He stood crookedly at the cliff's edge, holding the functional metal urn in both hands. The weight appeared to tax him. "May your soul find more peace in the next realm."

Next realm, Danoff snickered to himself. *Realm schmealm.*

Once a sufficient wind had picked up, Heller tipped the urn sideways. Brackett's cremated ashes swirled out, some of them flying backwards and into Danoff's eye. The rest plunged down into the gorge, clinging together desperately at first, then dissipating. The simple ceremony performed, Heller turned to face the third member of the group, Senta Newell. She smiled at him.

"Thank you for coming, Senta," Heller told her, then turned to Danoff with a look of untrusting disdain. "Tom."

Danoff nodded.

"I'm going to stay here awhile," Heller continued, coughing. His body shuddered. "You can head back without me; I'll make my way."

"Good day," Newell said politely.

The two of them started back down toward the village, a winding, precarious trail leading through the rocky terrain. Newell stared straight ahead, gathering her overcoat closed. The cold mountain air bit through the flimsy material.

"Cigarette?" Danoff asked, extending a pack.

Newell took one. She paused to light it, shielding it against the wind with her back. "Why did you come with me today?"

He thought about it, smiling to himself. It wasn't any personal involvement with the dead man, Andrew Brackett — some geriatric nobody in his eyes. It was a simple concern for his interests: Newell, to be specific. As a member of the tobacco cartel he had influence, access to the best sup-

plies. Newell was a straggler with no assets. No, Danoff thought wickedly. *One asset.* "Something to do," he lied, a reasonable answer.

She glared at him.

"Why're you sucking up to that gerry?" he continued obliviously.

"Doesn't hurt to be respectful," she replied. "And I might as well admit, my motive isn't selfless. You realize what Brackett's death means."

"Sure," Danoff said, before realizing that he could find nothing significant about Andrew Brackett. "What does it mean?"

"Heller," Newell said. "He's the last of the first generation. He may be our last chance."

It came clear to him at once. Vernon Heller had been a part of the village from its beginning, the last link to the outside world, which neither of them knew and would probably never know. They had been born into a geographic prison, never learning what their ancestors had done to be incarcerated. It was a brutal colony of inbreeding, violence, and repression. Danoff managed well enough, but Newell was a different story, and Heller represented the last chance for her to learn the truth.

A slim one, Danoff mused. "What the hell makes you think he can tell us? He's just like the rest. Haven't you interrogated most of them, anyway?"

"Most," she agreed sadly.

"If they ever knew why they were placed here, they don't know now," Danoff continued cynically. "I'm surprised Heller can even remember his own name."

Newell stared at him contemptuously. "Well, maybe I've got nothing to lose by hoping."

"And what happens when we know?" Danoff prodded.

Newell did not reply right away, but stopped to look him straight in the eye. Eventually, she said, "I don't know about you, but I'm gonna get out someday. If it kills me."

Danoff laughed. "Probably will."

They were halfway back to the village proper when a low rumbling sounded in the distance. Danoff stopped in his tracks instinctively, listening. "Oh, crapes — Medfield'll kill me!" He took off toward town.

It was the helicopter.



II

Bad news, he thought, always breaks at three o'clock in the morning.

The limo was caught in a gridlock. It was a tense time for Harrison Royer. With the national administration changing hands, Royer was ripe for replacement, and a crisis like this would cinch it. Pushing sixty, he wore glasses and sideburns and parted his hair wrong for a man his age, a calculated defiance of time's passing. Sweats like these, potential security disasters of such magnitude that they would make Watergate look like a milk run — they were bound to happen now and then. But they happened all too frequently for Royer's taste. A youthful front was his last defense in a life that had aged him all too quickly.

He could see it now, the press, photographers, bombarding him with questions: "Director Royer, how can you justify your participation in such a project? What possible need could such a place serve?" And shots of himself on the vid, sweating like a yak, government lawyers whispering in his ear. The obligatory "No comment." And, of course, that was just on a national scale. If the *truth* actually got out, the international repercussions would smother him like a slow ant on a picnic blanket.

The vidphone sounded. Royer triggered the seatback unit and tried to put on a composed face. "Yes?"

It was his assistant, Ray Malcolm. "Mr. Royer, you've heard ..."

"Of course I've heard," he said with unfaked annoyance.

"I've talked with Hank Deming in Tracking," Malcolm said excitedly. "He's got 'walkers stationed all over Ridge Edge, combing for the escapee — but it won't do us much good until we have a description."

"Didn't one of the watchers spot him on his way out?" Royer asked.

"Yes, but he was knocked unconscious. That's how we know. There's a chance our satellites picked up the incident, but we can't be sure ..."

"I'm stuck in traffic," Royer said dismissively. Unlike his annoyance, his composure was faked. "Ring back if there are any important developments; otherwise, I'll see you at the office."

"Yes, sir," Malcolm's image faded.

Dammit, Royer thought. If we don't manage to bury this one, I *deserve* to be ousted.

III

When Danoff arrived at the top of the slope, the supply helicopter was just hovering into view, a dark, intimidating insect. It circled around, centering itself over the drop site as droves of villagers piled into the

clearing.

Danoff scrambled down toward the chaos, watching as the cargo hatch slid open. The black-uniformed men inside, their opaque, bubbled face-masks gleaming, started releasing the crates. Demi-parachutes opened behind them, a half-assed attempt to slow their descent. The crowd din increased sharply as the shoving matches began, people jockeying for position.

Seventh crate, Danoff thought, pushing into the tangled mass of elbows and heels. *Where's the receipt team?*

The first crate crashed into the huddled masses. Having crowded aside momentarily to give it room to land, thirty people were on it in an instant, tearing off the parachute, prying at the wood. One by one, the subsequent crates received similar treatment, people swarming over one another ravenously to reap the treasures within: food, alcohol, clothing, shoes, first-aid supplies, medicinal and recreational drugs, makeup, deodorant, soap, tools, utensils, all the needs and wants of a civilized society. *Like we're civilized*, Danoff thought, crashing through the crowd, following the trajectory of crate number seven, the tobacco.

"About fucking time!" Brad Medfield screamed as Danoff arrived. "Here's your club!"

Danoff grabbed the short, thick piece of wood and made a place for himself with the other circle-men, while the looters waited just inside the circle. Medfield called directions as crate number seven began its descent, and the circle quickly shifted in unison. The crate landed dead center — a lucky break, no casualties this time. "Have at it, then!" Medfield ordered, as the looters surged forward.

A woman shoved past Danoff and made for the crate. He turned after her and clubbed her on the head, twice. When she didn't get up, he got back to the circle. *I'm gonna lose this gig if I fuck up again*, Danoff said, shoving away other stragglers. *Then I'll be like Senta, scrounging just to subsist, an extraneous slab of meat. Only I doubt my body will fetch much of a price.*

IV

"**T**his is one of the watchers," Ray Malcolm said, ushering Royer into the room. "Carl Pritchard."

Pritchard was a short, skinny man with thinning black hair and glasses. He was a plain-clothes watcher on Ridge Edge, stationed for just such emergencies. One of his cheeks was swollen, and there was a large bruise on his forehead.

Royer studied him intently. "Care to explain what happened, Pritchard?"

"Well, I was stationed at North 611th Street, overlooking pass number twelve," Pritchard

began, still looking exhausted.

"Sometimes drunks wander up there, and I have to go drag 'em out.

At any rate, this time I saw someone come out. Nobody ever came out before."

"What'd he look like?" Royer asked.

"I ran downstairs and caught up with him on the street, and said, 'Excuse me, but I'm afraid you'll have to come with me.' And he ... well, he clubbed me. Nobody ever clubbed me before. That's how I knew."

Royer winced. "Who's this man's superior?" he asked Malcolm.

"Drewson?" Malcolm shrugged. "I think."

"Did you report it to Drewson—he thinks immediately?" Royer asked.

"Relatively immediately, sir," Pritchard said. "As soon as I woke up, anyway."

"Description," Royer demanded.

"The man was six feet tall, with dark brown hair and a gap between his two front teeth. He was wearing a long gray overcoat and brown shoes. He looked angry and confused when he hit me. Nobody ever *hit* me before."

Malcolm scribbled down the description.

"Get that description to Deming," Royer ordered. "We'll hold Pritchard until the escapee is captured."

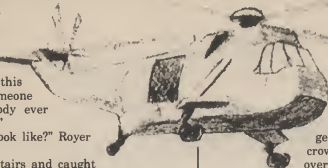
V

The marketplace was underway by sundown. Newell stared longingly as the cartels set up their barter tents, preparing to haggle trade rates however the hell they wanted. Newell had arrived at the end of the drop, sifting through the remains, coming up with some powdered potatoes and three cans of soup that had fallen loose in the chaos. Then she had helped a kid out from under one of the crates; too ambitious, he'd gotten himself pinned.

So what have I got to trade, she wondered. Her small cabin in the Dump was stocked with nothing but water purification tablets, clothing, and other worthless odds and ends. Potatoes and soup would keep her afloat for three or four days tops, a generous estimate — then she'd be back on Tom's doorstep, fucking for food.

Maybe, she thought, I should just find him now. No sense in delaying the inevitable.

Just then, a fight erupted nearby. A man carrying a box of tradeables had apparently irked a couple of stragglers. They were rolling around on



the ground

now, wrestling.

Newell pounced on the fallen box and wrapped her hands around the first two things she found before getting butted sideways by the crowd. She tucked them into her overcoat and stumbled off.

Safely out of the way, she studied her find: a large bottle of brandy, extremely valuable, and a carton of cigarettes, already opened — the cellophane wrapping was torn. Still, the two together could stave off Danoff for another week and a half — assuming she pawned it before the owner caught up with her. She hurried off to the food cartel.

VI

"Well, this is damn useless!" Hank Deming shouted when Greene passed him the description. "Only fourteen million six-foot brown-hairs around!"

Greene shrugged. "Don't forget the gap-tooth, sir."

"Urg!" Deming shouted, moving into the back of the van. A burly redhead, he was an excitable man, channeling suppressed human nature through therapeutic grunts. He snapped on his headset and hit the override for his entire network of streetwalkers. "Heads up, everybody — news flash from Intelligence section. Our quarry is six feet tall, brown hair, gray overcoat, brown shoes." He scowled at Greene. "And he has a gap-tooth."

"So what you're saying," said Eleven, laconically, "is that we've all found him by now, twice."

Seven griped, typically. "Oh, great! He could be halfway to Montana!"

"I know, I know!" Deming shouted. "I guess it's the best they could do."

"What's a gap-tooth?" Three asked. "You mean a gap between his teeth?"

"Just shut up and do your damn jobs. We need to cover Ridge Edge before morning or he'll be long gone." Deming rubbed his eyelids. "Pour me a coffee, Greene." He turned back to the microphone. "Keep your channels open unless there's a lead."

Greene handed him the coffee.

"Swamp-muck!" Deming shouted, spraying. "Gah!"

VII

The brandy alone yielded ten cans of soup, a large bag of dried apricots, two coffee bricks, and two loaves of bread. She easily could have held out for more, but the food cartel man had been nervous to avoid a confrontation with the alcohol people, and she'd been forced to decide quickly. Still, with a stock like that to start the month, Newell decided to hold the cigarettes in reserve. Better hide them, though, she decided.

She peeled open the carton and dumped the contents on her bed, expecting one or two of the packs to be missing. But all ten packs were lying there, unopened — along with a folded sheet of paper. "What the hell?" she asked nobody.

"Senta!" a voice interrupted. Danoff.

"Just a second!" she called, hastily shoveling the cigarettes under the bed. She stepped over to the door, undid the locks, and opened it.

Danoff stood there with a smarmy grin, holding a cardboard box filled with provisions in his arms. "A week's worth," he said. "Usual exchange rate?"

"Sorry, Tom," she said firmly. "I don't need it just yet, thank."

Danoff's smirk vanished, replaced by an expression of irked disappointment. "Oh — you scored?"

"Found some abandoned brandy," she explained, letting him in nonetheless. "The alcohol cartel was a little careless, I guess."

"Probably dipping into the stock," Danoff joked with a forced *heh-heh*. As he often did when she put him off, he tried to smooth over his past leverage by acting like a genuine friend. "A drink anyway? I brought some Scotch."

"Sure." She sat on a wooden box, staring at the bed, where Danoff had flopped unceremoniously. "Make it in time?"

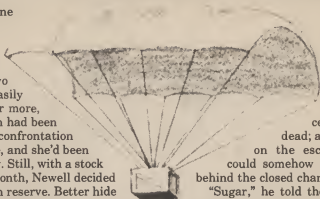
"Barely," he said, opening the Scotch. "I got docked some smokes for it. Still, enough tradeables for the month. Just have to adjust my habit." He took a swig, then shifted to pass her the bottle. His foot scraped against the folded sheet of paper.

She took the bottle wordlessly.

"What's this?" he asked, picking it up and unfolding it.

"I don't know," she said, feigning ignorance. "Maybe it came with the ..."

Danoff interrupted, meeting her gaze. "Senta — it's a map."



VIII

Andy Harwell, known to his colleagues as "Three," ducked into a deli for a cup of coffee during the final leg of the Ridge Edge sweep. The microphone in his ear was dead; apparently no more news on the escapee. Nonetheless, he could somehow picture Deming griping behind the closed channel.

"Sugar," he told the counter guy, glancing out the front windows.

A six-foot brown-hair passed the doorway. *Hey, there's the escapee*, Harwell thought dryly, then looked again. The man looked completely out of place, almost comically so, staring straight up at the towering buildings overhead. Dressed in a long, brown overcoat, he had a grizzled, uncivilized countenance. Harwell took a long pull on the coffee and stumbled out the door in pursuit.

"I think I got something," he broadcast. "592nd and Lambourn, heading south."

Deming's voice crackled anxiously. "Oh, cripes — stop him before some reporter gets the jump!"

"What's the method?" Harwell asked.

"Friendly approach," Deming suggested. "If he bolts, he's our man. Use a tranq."

Harwell acknowledged by flicking the off switch in his molar with his tongue.

The man had slowed to a halt at the corner, watching with unmuted amazement as cars shot through the intersection. Harwell slowed next to him. "Excuse me," Harwell said. "Don't I know you ...?"

The man's face contorted in confusion. He wheeled around and darted down the street.

The tranq punctured the man's ass. He tumbled to the pavement a block away.

IX

It took them a few days to work up the nerve to follow the map. In the interim, they avoided human contact to the extent that they could. Danoff did have one shift minding the store for the cartel, but with that exception they stayed holed up in Newell's cabin.

One night, as they smoked the fugitive cigarettes, Newell looked over at Danoff. *The idea of getting out is making him less of an asshole*, she mused. *We're almost motiveless confidants now*. It was a revealing thought. She had come to believe that conditioning had robbed her of the capability for pure friendship. Then again, she realized, it had. The outside, or at least the idea of it, had brought about this state of affairs. *If I hadn't*

scored these smokes, we'd still be using each other.

Newell could not resist moving over to the loose floorboard and extracting the map for another look. According to the dotted line, the escape route required a treacherous descent into the Gorge. Years of preconditioned fear of the Gorge made this seem impossible, but at the same time, it was the only logical starting point. *If we're not supposed to get out, it only makes sense that it look like we can't.*

An hour after sundown, they sneaked out of the village and hiked to the spot where Heller had performed Brackett's ash-dumping ceremony. Danoff smiled at some obscure irony. Newell placed it: joining the dead. "After you," he said, gesturing expansively. She paced along the edge, staring down toward hope.

X

"Hasn't said a word, sir," said Sal Briggs, head of Interrogation Section. "He's as clamp-mouthed as they come. You'd think he didn't speak English."

Who is this rube? Royer wondered. *I wonder if he even graduated from college.*

"Standard methods don't seem to be working," Briggs continued sourly through a mouthful of donut. "He seems to be expecting us to hurt him or something. We can't do that, naturally, but maybe we could program a robot ...?"

Royer cut him off. "Drug him up or something. And fast. We've got to know if anyone was with him."

Briggs nodded, spraying a few crumbs.

Royer paced out of the grilling room, fiddling with his sideburns, considering either retirement or defection.

XI

The descent to the Gorge floor took them over five hours, grunting and sweating, expecting to lose their grips. After they managed to get over an initial overhang, however, the cliffside had been strangely more cooperative, footholds and occasional ledges to rest on. *Whoever sent the map, Newell had thought, knew that it could be done, somehow.* Her hands were torn and bleeding when she finally flopped unceremoniously to the blissfully flat surface of the Gorge floor.

Danoff was waiting there for her, sitting and gnawing on a hunk of bread. Obviously exhausted, he pretended not to be. "Bread?" he asked.

She shook her head, looking down at her pack. "This'll last us three days tops, if we're lucky," she warned. "The map won't do us any good if we starve before we're out of here."

Danoff shrugged, swallowed, and packed up the bread.

They slept there till sunrise. Newell woke up, wrecked and battered, and sipped water from a canteen. The map's dotted line led west, deeper into the gorge; then they would ascend a steep but presumably manageable cliffwall that led out of the mountains into Whatever.

I suppose it doesn't matter, she thought, watching Danoff forge haphazardly in front of her. So long as it's different.

XII

Raymond Malcolm stared at his boss, who sat thoughtfully behind his desk in a pose of stressed authority, fingers steepled under his chin, unshaven, tie loose. Malcolm had always respected Mr. Royer, but it looked as if this one was out of his reach.

"So much for need-to-know," Royer muttered.

Malcolm nodded. Too many people knew already, the streetwalkers, interrogators, watchers. All of them were sworn to secrecy, of course, but the media would definitely shell out the big bucks to spread this scandal across the country like squeeze margarine, even if it resulted in the U.S. getting ostracized by every industrialized nation on the map.

As if reading Malcolm's thoughts, Royer spoke up. "There's nothing else to do," he said. "The escapee's a clam. We'll have to assume he was alone, program a robot for a lethal injection."

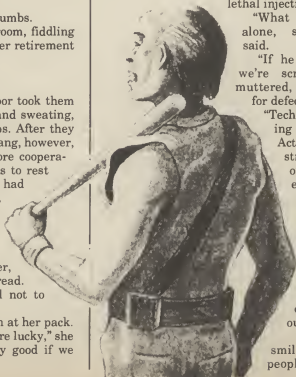
"What if he wasn't alone, sir?" Malcolm said.

"If he wasn't alone, we're screwed," Royer muttered, finally opting for defection.

"Technically, violating the Peace Drug Act could be construed as an act of war, whatever that means these days.

We'll be isolated from every civilized nation in the world. No trading, no exploiting ... completely on our own."

Malcolm smiled. "Maybe people will finally



buy American, sir."

"I don't find it funny," Royer said grimly. "The Chaldeans are a necessary precaution, Malcolm. I'm sure at least ten other countries have hostility farms of their own. It's the only logical solution to that damn stupid PDA."

"Why should they cheat?"

Royer looked at Malcolm coldly. "If we trusted them blindly, they'd screw us; if they trusted us blindly, we'd screw them. That's just how it is. Don't cheat, you're screwed."

"I'm not sure I follow, sir."

Royer frowned. "You don't know anything about the government at all, do you? How did you get this job, anyway?"

XIII

They walked for two days, a dull, arduous trudge through the mountains. All the things that had plagued Newell's mind prior to the journey — the ramifications of leaving the colony, wild imaginative ramblings of what lay beyond, happy anticipation of an end to the dismal village lifestyle — had been swept clean by the numbing exhaustion of endless exertion. And then something snapped.

As she pulled herself to the top of a particularly steep ascent and turned to help Danoff up after her, she accidentally slipped and stepped on Danoff's hand. He plummeted to his death.

At first she was totally shocked. Then she laughed. "That was no accident," she said to nobody, and continued her climb.

Confused, distressed, and exhausted, Newell turned around as she heard a loud, foreign hum in the background. She frantically scrambled to the top of the slope and found herself looking out over an immense, mysteriously illuminated and miraculously complex hive of tall, diverse, rectangular prism-shaped buildings sticking up into the sky. The slope led down to a broad path where vehicles like the helicopter, without spinning metal things on top but rather round black circular things rolling along underneath them, were surging back and forth at ridiculous speeds. To put it simply, she was having a dreadful problem of perspective.

Then two men came up to her and said, "Glad you could make it." One of them took her overcoat and slid it on. He was a six-foot brown-hair with a gap-tooth who looked completely out of place, almost comically so. He wandered off into the maze.

"What the hell ...?" Newell asked.

"He's the decoy," the remaining man said. "He'll take the Feds off your trail. Don't worry about him. He's done this five times; he always escapes." He extended his hand, leading her down toward the street. "My name's Carl. Come on, before someone sees you. I take it you got the

note?"

"In the carton?" Newell asked.

"Yep. We were hoping for a bigger turnout. You're alone, eh?"

"Yes," Newell said.

Carl smiled. "We'll have to try again. It's not easy sneaking those messages in, you know. If you hostiles weren't so suspicious of each other, we'd get more of you out." Carl opened the door to one of the vehicles and pointed into it. A woman sat there waiting. "Anyway, hop in. You've been liberated. Sheila here will take you to our adjustment therapist in Wyoming."

Adjustment therapist? Decoy? Sheila? There were too many questions. "I don't get it. Why have I been 'liberated'? Who the hell are you people? What's in this for you?"

Carl smiled affably. "You'll find out at the adjustment therapist, but I will say this much. Hostiles are worth their weight in gold, these days. You're going to be a very wealthy woman."

Newell smiled. She could live with that. She bent down to get into the vehicle.

"Oh, one more thing," Carl interjected, pulling a blunt object out of his coat. "Would you mind clubbing me over the head? For the effect, you see."



Our Next Issue

The Fall 1998 issue of *Aboriginal* will contain the following stories by *Aboriginal* veterans: "The Dome Game," by Keith Brooke, "The E-ticket," by J. Brooke (no relation to Keith); and some first appearances including "Lou's Seventh Cylinder," by Marc Levinthal, "Watching Maynard," by Stephen Wallenfels, "Angel With A Stainless-Steel Soul," by B. McLaren, and "The Catafalque," by Scott M. Azmus.

In addition we'll have all of our usual features and a another special sculpture cover by artist David Deitrick based on the Motie from Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's *The Mote in God's Eye*.

Don't miss out.

Help-Plants

By David Riley

Art by Clyde Duensing III

Flannery eased the control stick down, allowing the small, four-man cruiser to settle on the lush vegetation that covered the brow of the hill, a good thirty metres from the all-pervading jungle. Tall, purple, tree-like plants rose up from beyond the broad indigo river that curved around the foot of the hill before meandering back into the jungle's depths. The river water reflected the cloud-streaked sky overhead as Queldon's sun rose to its zenith, a brick red furnace high in the sky.

A small man with large dextrous hands and a drinker's nose, Flannery O'Casey turned to his companion at the back of the cruiser, hunched like an oversized goblin on the two adjoining seats, his long arms linked around his knees. Uncomfortable though the Queldonian's position may have been, it was the only satisfactory way in which the three metre tall amphibious native could fit into the passenger space of the craft. Fullgor's red eyes stared resignedly from beneath the capacious ridge of his brow plate.

Flannery laughed jerkily, his nervousness only just under control despite the three hours he'd had to get used to the Queldonian. He'd paid Fullgor well to guide him here. Too well, he thought, remembering how successfully the creature had haggled with him earlier in the day. Fifty Queldonian talents was far too much, he was sure.

Still ...

"So this is where we'll find the famous Queldonian Help-plant." Flannery stared through the windscreen at the sentient vegetation. Large, purple, fleshy tendrils rose about the cruiser, recoiling from the cooling jet-tubes along its flanks. Smoke billowed from plant life scorched by their landing.

"Rare — Help-plant — now is," Fullgor breathed, his voice the asthmatic wheeze typical of his race.

"But it grows hereabouts? There's sure to be some here, isn't there? That's what you told me at the hotel. I'd find Help-plants here, you said." Flannery tried to edge the worry from his voice. Down to less than enough talents to pay for his hotel room and fuel for his flight out of here, after unsuccessfully searching for Help-plants for two months now, he couldn't afford any more failures. An alcoholic space-trader's tale about the near-mythical plant had seemed too good an opportunity to Flannery six months ago on Guerdion Major, where he'd just off-loaded a shipment of tree-spice.

"They'll grow anywhere. Don't need much room. Just plant 'em and watch 'em grow. That's all," the old spacer had said. "But watch it. The Droid Corporations don't like 'em. Do away with mechanicals fer good. Who'd want to pay out good money fer somethin' that'll need replacin' in a few years' time, worn out an' useless, when yer can breed yer own Help-plants. As many as yer like. Fer free. Whoever starts off sellin' 'em can make a fortune. They'll sell like crazy. The big boys know of 'em, though. That's why they're rare. Damn near killed 'em off fer good. Killed off a few o' the traders as tried to get 'em off planet, too. So watch yerself if yer try it, boyo. They're worth a friggin' fortune to you or me. But to the Droid Corporations they're nowt but a menace. An' they've only one way o' dealin' with things like that."

Many times since he'd landed on Queldon in search of the plants, he'd wondered whether the Droid Corporations (Interplanetary Robotics, Robo-Servants Incorporated, and Mitsubishi-Honda Meca-Slaves) had succeeded in exterminating every last Help-plant. No one he asked, until he met Fullgor, had been of much help, though he'd followed up a few false leads, some of which had almost ended in his death. Which was why one hand never strayed very far from the gun hidden away in a pouch on his jacket. The Queldonian might be big and strong, with a hide as tough as a dinosaur's backside, but a shot from the blaster would scorch a hole through his torso big enough to stick his arm through if he tried anything funny.

"Help-plant here," Fullgor assured him. His wide, toothless, lipless mouth broadened, though whether it was a grin, a grimace, or a frown, Flannery could not tell. The Queldonian's round, heavily gilled head was all but inscrutable. Even his eyes, beneath their protective, transparent lids, were characterless orbs, like blood-red marbles.

"Good," Flannery said. "I'd almost given the friggin' things up as a myth," he added, his nervousness increasing his tendency to talk too much.

A touch of a button released the overhead canopy. Moist air, odorous with a stunning array of smells, blew over them, filled with sounds of hidden wildlife. The sun's light burned Flannery's exposed hands and the bald spot at the back of his head. In Queldon City the sun's rays were filtered for off-worlders' benefit through membranous domes.



Automatically, Flannery reached for a cap and a pair of lightweight gloves.

"Right, then, Fullgor, old son, are we ready to look for these Help-plants?" Flannery slung a backpack containing the equipment he'd need over his shoulder and heaved himself onto the cruiser's side before dropping down onto the pliant hilltop below. Only months of experience had overcome his aversion to the sentient plant life endemic to Queldon, enabling him to all but ignore the soft touch of the masses of coiled stalks that caressed his legs as he strode downhill towards the river. Behind him, Fullgor hopped from the cruiser with an agility impossible in a human even remotely his size, before ambling down with his bow-legged, wobbling gait, quickly leading the way to the river.

Flannery followed in his wake, aware that Fullgor's native knowledge of the flora and fauna would prevent them from getting too close to any dangerous life forms. Though most of Queldon's plants were safe enough for humans, there were one or two that could cost an unwary tourist a limb — or even his life.

Cursing beneath his breath, Flannery swatted a deep red Queldonian equivalent of a dragonfly. The buzzing, finger-long "insect" spiralled towards a nest of sticky tendrils. Instantly they lashed out at it, gumming it to their crimson tips and pulling it down into the glutinous core of the plant's stalk. Within seconds it was swallowed, digestive acids at work as the tendrils, lithe and speckless, stretched out again. Flannery grimaced, glad that the plant was too small to menace him.

"Are there any bigger buggers like that round here?" he asked Fullgor.

This time he was sure the Queldonian's mouth had formed a grin, as the creature swung his head in an affirmative gesture, saying, "Near them — I not — you take. Worry — no need."

Worry — no need, indeed! Flannery thought as he followed him on through ever deeper squirming masses of plant life. It was all right if you were as big as Fullgor, whose waist was barely reached by any of them yet, Flannery grumbled to himself. His chest and neck were repeatedly wrapped in broad leaves that touched him briefly like wafer-thin hands before sensuously sliding across his clothes as he shuddered in revulsion.

For more than an hour they picked their way along the riverbank, heading towards the jungle that loomed before them like a vast cathedral of purple-tinted, intertwining columns.

"How far is it we'll need to go, Fullgor, old son,

before we come across any of those plants?"

Although the alien's body language was often difficult for him to follow, he recognized the nodding of Fullgor's head as the Queldonian equivalent of a noncommittal shrug.

Flannery glanced at his watch. By local time there were only two hours to go before dusk. Not long if they were to go much farther and still get back to the cruiser before dark. The small man glanced at the back of Fullgor's head as the alien turned and pushed his way through the clinging vegetation.

"Hey, Fullgor, we can't go much farther. I'm not spending the night out here. No way."

Fullgor stopped. Looking back, his broad mouth enunciated his words with as much precision as his alien vocal cords could manage. "Safe — you be — with me," he said.

"That's as may be. But me, I prefer to lie on something that won't try to curl around me." He kicked at the grass. "Not unless it's human," he added. "And female. You follow?"

"Help-plant — you want — we search — go now — onwards. No find — easy."

Flannery tried to search the creature's eyes for any hidden meaning, but their deep red orbs were impossibly blank. Might as well search for meaning in a light bulb, he thought, disgruntled. "Okay. But let's not drag this out — all right?"

"Drag out?"

"Nothing. Forget it," Flannery told him testily.

An hour later, Fullgor slowed to a halt.

Up close, the jungle looked impossibly tall before them, much higher than Flannery had originally thought when they set out from the hill.

"Help-plants?" Flannery asked, stepping up to Fullgor's side. His mouth dropped open. Surrounded by tall, mauve leaves, almost shield-like and sharp, a small, circular clearing opened up ahead of them, covered by a layer of grass-vines. In the middle of the clearing stood a man-like succulent. Like most of Queldon's plantlife, it was predominantly purple, with veins of a deep, reddish hue that pulsed about its fleshy limbs.

Although he had heard the rumours and legends, the sight of a Help-plant now was a far more awe-inspiring experience than Flannery could have ever imagined. It was much like a large terrestrial cactus, though in place of prickles only finger-like tendrils, thick and sturdy, wavered from ridges towards the end of its limbs. Sensory appendages rose from the dome at the top of its pod-like body, fringed antennae that were capable of identifying light and sound to a degree beyond that of humans. Most peculiar of all was the dense mass of tendrils



that spread around its base. More legs than a frigin' millipede, Flannery thought as he glanced at them. Like thick, encrimsoned veins, pumped full of juice, they provided it with the means to lift from the ground and move, immensely versatile and strong.

His heart pounding with excitement, Flannery stepped forwards, unslinging his backpack to reach inside for his equipment. Between the Help-plant's base and its limbs was a cluster of densely packed warts. These, he had already learned, were the plant's young, still attached to their parent. Anytime now they would part themselves from it, slither to the ground, and become individuals of their own, miniature Help-plants that would grow to maturity within two to three years.

"Fullgor, old son, full marks. It's brilliant, brilliant!" Flannery could have danced a jig, had his legs not been as tired as they were after all the trekking they'd done today to get here.

Fullgor stalked forward till he stood before the plant. He waved Flannery towards him. "This — Help-plant's young," he said, reaching out and plucking one of the "warts" from its trunk. Hair-like tendrils wriggled from the part that had been connected to the plant.

Curious, Flannery looked down at it as the Queldonian slowly handed it to him, its stalk held carefully between two of his huge, leathery fingers.

Flannery held his own hand out for it. Landing on his palm with a soft squelch, it settled at once into an upright position. A moment later Flannery gasped as a hot pain shot through his hand.

"It stabbed me! The little bastard's stabbed me!"

He shook his hand, feeling the stinging agony swell beneath the skin on the palm of his hand. It must have cut straight through the glove covering his hand and pierced him, he thought. Was it inject-ing poison? Aghast, he stared at the thing in terror. It wouldn't budge from his hand however hard he shook it. He raised his other hand to sweep the thing off when Fullgor reached out and grabbed his wrist in a grip as hard as iron.

"No," the Queldonian told him firmly.

Flannery struggled, but the alien was too strong.

"What are you doing to me, you treacherous bastard? What d'you think you're playing at?"

Panic-stricken, he felt sweat on his face as the pain in his hand spread, moving up his arm, as the blood within his veins seemed to boil.

Fullgor produced a communicator. He flicked it on with his thumb and spoke into it.

"What are you playing at, Fullgor?"



The Queldonian merely glanced at him, blinked, then broadened his mouth yet again. Flannery was certain that the bastard was grinning at him now. More than certain, in fact! Angry, Flannery reached to the pouch on the front of his jacket for the blaster hidden in it. Whether Queldonians were telepathic or not, Flannery did not know, but the next instant, even as his fingers touched the gun, the creature swung its communicator down on his wrist, snapping the bones instantly.

Flannery screamed.

"Wait," Fullgor told him.

Looking up, Flannery saw a cruiser appear above the jungle, heading their way. Its jets hummed as it hovered for a moment, then slowly descended towards them, settling nearby.

"Who the —" Flannery began to groan, when the cruiser's canopy slid open. "MacIntyre! What the frigg'n hell are you doing here? I thought you'd be dead."

The old cruiser grinned at him as he climbed out of the cruiser and strolled towards him, his grizzled face the picture of health. Flannery could hardly believe it. When he'd last seen him on Guerdion Major he'd been near death, his third liver transplant all but useless — and not enough money left to try for another.

"Surprised?" MacIntyre asked, needlessly.

Flannery glanced round at Fullgor. "You're in on this, aren't you? You're in with MacIntyre?"

Fullgor swung his head in assent. "Partners," he said.

"That's right," MacIntyre confirmed. "Old Fullgor an' myself are partners. From far back. Years we spent searchin' round Qeldon fer Help-plants. Years! The Droid Corporations did a good job in kilin' 'em off. Almost too good, in fact. Many a time we were all but ready to give up. It was only our conviction that somewhere we'd find one that kept us goin'. An' we did find one at last." He nodded at the Help-plant. "It took us half a lifetime, but eventually, right here, we found it all right."

"But" — Flannery glanced at the "wart" on his hand — "why this?"

MacIntyre shrugged. He took out a pipe from his baggy shirt and lit it. "There are some things not many people know about Help-plants." He puffed at his pipe in contemplation for a moment while Flannery squirmed in Fullgor's tight grip. "They're clever bastards, Help-plants. Brilliant learners. But they have to be taught." MacIntyre paused. "There's only one way they can be taught. Or trained, if yer like. Domesticated. Their young have to be nurtured in their last few weeks on a host that can pass on the knowledge they need."

"What knowledge?" Flannery asked, still sweating hard, though the pain had lessened now to a dull throbbing that had passed up his arm and begun to spread through his shoulder and down into his chest.

"Human knowledge. Human needs. Without this they're useless. It's the difference between wolves and a well-trained dog. Though they're more useful than dogs. Immeasurably more useful, in fact." MacIntyre seemed to be enjoying himself.

"But why me?" Flannery asked.

"How else could we get someone out here? It took me months to find someone who'd take the bait. An' you were it." MacIntyre laughed. "It's just a pity you'll be in no kind o' shape to take a share in our profits when the job's been done an' we can start marketin' our domesticated Help-plants. But if it were possible to do what you're doin' now an' survive, I'd've done it myself ages ago."

Flannery slumped to his knees as the throbbing spread through him.

"You bastard," he muttered, but his voice was weak. Already his vision was beginning to blur as the warmth rose up into his neck. Fullgor released his hand to pluck off another of the "warts." He started to raise it towards Flannery's face when there was a sudden, high-pitched hiss, deafeningly loud. Fullgor's mouth belched open with a roar of pain as his hand burst in a vile explosion of rubbery flesh, blood, and bones. MacIntyre tried to sprint for his cruiser, but another shot cut his legs from beneath him, laying him out flat in a pool of blood.

Flannery sobbed, bewildered. Already he was beginning to faint, as the ground rose dark and soft towards him, blurring his sight of the men closing in, sniper rifles clutched to their chests.

It was several months before Flannery was released from hospital, the scar still glistening on his hand where the Help-plant had been surgically removed, its tendrils painfully extracted, section by section. Flannery flexed his hand, remembering the agony he had gone through.

An Interplanetary Robotics rep, standing in on behalf of the Droid Corporations, saw him off.

"A thousand talents have been deposited in a Barachan Bank in your name," he told Flannery on their way to the spaceport. "You're a lucky bastard. We could have left you. Or killed you, like we did the others. Just remember that. If we hadn't been keeping watch on MacIntyre you'd have ended up budding Help-plants for them till the little buggers

dried you up, perhaps in one, two, or three years from now."

"You knew what they were up to?"

"Suspected, that's all. We weren't sure if they'd found a survivor or not.

Without that they were harmless. If they'd found one ... well, that was different. With one, they had to be sorted out. And stopped."

Flannery glanced through the speeding road-taxi's window as they approached the spaceport perimeter fence.

"Was it because of what was needed to train them that the

Droid Corporations were against Help-plants?" he asked.

The rep laughed. "Morality stop business? You're a trader yourself. Would morality stop you?"

"Then why?"

"Who'd buy them? Who would buy them, Mr. O'Casey, if they knew what their young — their buds — were capable of? They all breed eventually. And, however much you might try to prevent accidents, they would still happen. Then hell would let loose. No, we're happy enough making droids. They're safe. Tried and tested. Help-plants? They're only good for the likes of MacIntyre and Fullgor. Cowboys! Bums! Con men! And fools!"

Flannery knew he was right.

Or almost.

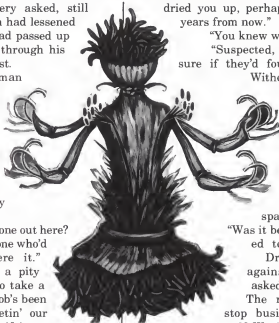
Because, deep as the surgery had been to remove the last vestige of the Help-plant's bud from his system, the doctors could not remove — or even be aware of — something hidden within his mind. Something that had reached, in those hours when he slumped into unconsciousness, far inside him and spoken with his mind. It was there with him now, whispering. Whispering about others of its race, hidden far from sight within the trackless jungle. Others who wanted, one day, to spread once more.

With his help.

Flannery thanked the rep as he set off towards his waiting ship, fully fuelled and ready to set off into space. The little voice, nestled within his thoughts, told him he would return. One day.

Because Help-plants weren't always just slaves. Or victims.

Sometimes, he knew, they were wolves. □



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